

STAR WARS

SUPERNATURAL ENCOUNTERS



The Trial and Transformation of Arhul Hextrophon

By Joe Bongiorno

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Introduction

The genesis of this story came about in late 1999 when Rich Handley and I wrote our first in-universe article for Star Wars Gamer magazine, called The University of Sanbra Guide to Intelligent Life: The Marvel Years, which detailed six races from the Marvel series. Our next article was to be Cult Encounters, which featured Master Historian Arhul Hextrophon exploring the dark cults of the Star Wars universe. For various reasons (see the link above), that wasn't published until last year.

The sequel to it was going to be even more ambitious, as it would have had Hextrophon exploring the supernatural entities worshipped by those cults, a journey that would lead him into the dark bowels of Otherspace (from the West End Games RPG adventures of the same name), where he'd unravel secrets that certain forces didn't want revealed. The premise of the story was Alan Moore's wild Star Wars tales from the pages of Marvel UK, "Tilotny Throws a Shape" and "The Pandora Effect." Only an outline of this idea existed in 2000, and it wouldn't be until about 2004-5, when I approached Pablo Hidalgo about publishing these on the new paid-subscription part of the official Starwars.com website called the Hyperspace fan club. He liked the idea, and it was good timing as he'd been intending to publish a number of previously unpublished material, as well as new and old fiction, on the site. I first polished up Cult Encounters and sent it along.

Then began several days of research into every corner of the Star Wars expanded universe, including Star Wars Marvel and Marvel UK stories, West End Games adventures and supplements, Star Wars Dark Horse comics, novels from Bantam, Del Rey, Scholastic, and much more! Once complete, I sat down, and over the course of the next two days, with only the necessary breaks and about two hours of sleep, Supernatural Encounters poured out of me fully formed. That's hard for some to believe. It's hard for me to believe looking back now, but it happened. Yes, it took much longer to edit and proofread, but even now, after the numerous revisions, it remains the same basic story that was written in that bizarre two-day period. After submitting several early versions to Lucasfilm until I was content with a final draft, I moved on to other endeavors. Sadly, the powers-that-be saw fit to take down Hyperspace before it could be published.

But that was not the end... Several of my proofreaders, dedicated Star Wars enthusiasts all, urged me to put it online. The only problem was that some advancements had been made in the years since, and these would have to be accounted for if the story was going to still work. The fact is that the developments in both the Fate of the Jedi and Clone Wars series (the "Mortis" arc) fit strangely well into what was already in place. Once I completed that, I released Cult Encounters (I'm happy to say to some very favorable reviews), and set a date for its sequel, October 31, 2018, nearly 20 years since the ideas were first conceived. In that time, I had the opportunity to bring more proofreaders onboard, as well as to hear ideas from fans over at the Jedi Council forums, many who tapped into my train of thought, and others who had some cool and fantastic ideas of their own!

Supernatural Encounters remains a dense work and not light reading. It features lengthy pages of discussion and debate on metaphysical subjects, numerous references to esoteric races and obscure storylines, and other subject matter that is generally challenging, e.g., time-dilations in pocket universes, realm distinction, time-travel, ontology, cosmogony, theology, all of which I felt was needed to put together a potentially cogent origin for life in the Star Wars galaxy that harmonizes with all of the many stories that have come out since 1978, including those which were later tied into the universe (e.g., E.T.), whether as in-joke or not.

For those of you brave enough to read through its four parts and 32 chapters, I recommend first reading "Tilotny Throws a Shape" and "The Pandora Effect," if you haven't already, and probably "Cult Encounters," as that immediately precedes this story. I'd also recommend tackling it piecemeal, as it's very long. In the end, whether you agree or disagree with some of the conclusions reached by Hex, as his droid calls him, I only hope that you'll enjoy it! In the months ahead, I intend to provide endnotes, which I think will help readers trace the many sources that are referenced, as well as provide some insight into the thinking that went into this.

The frame events of this story occur 38 years after the Battle of Yavin

Prologue: Supernatural Encounters

Arhul Hextrophon sat alone in his study, cogitating on the inveterate, ceaseless stream that was time. The decreascent Chandrilan moon, now dissolving in the pastoral fields of chicory and lyris that grew wild upon the sweet-scented valleys he knew, spurred on his mordant brooding. How long had an ignescent galaxy been consumed by the dying rage of the ignorant, mad, and monstrous? Was peace only reserved for those for whom all endeavors ceased, or were the dead embroiled in yet other toils?

Arhul recalled with fondness Mon Mothma and others long departed who had given their lives to ensure that freedom from bondage and fear could be shared by all, a cause he once fervently shared. Now he wondered if it was all folly and naive idealism. What purposes did all the suffering and shed blood serve if for only a few months of peace before evil arose again to take the place of that which they'd fought so bitterly to defeat? Had the Alliance and its various successors only succeeded in fueling war, as their most outspoken critics contended?

The Lurmen had accused the Jedi and New Republic of being only slightly less militaristic than the Empire. The Sylphe King of Sainte-Evanëflore remarked that the Rebellion only fed the violence, "engorging the bloated death-worm that cares nothing for ideologies or sides." The Nuiwit Council of Elders charged that "in war, there is no good and evil, only spilled blood and shattered bones, only darkness and death." Even the famous Cody Sunn-Childe, who knew violence all too well, said that "War is the most fervent expression of the Father of Shadows, for it serves nought but him and those who serve him."

The mournful cries of the silverwing broke through the indigo night, reminding him of a strange holodrama he'd seen of dispossessed younglings in search of Arcadian dreams. There were, in fact, long stretches of peace in the galaxy, but that had not been true for some time. Even his own youth, while not misspent, had been taken from him. While on holiday with his sister and parents, they were abducted by Zygerrian slavers. Although rescued, the ordeal had forced him to grow up far quicker than he would otherwise have. It took him years to see it, but he later came to realize that perhaps that experience was for the best as it led him directly to journalism and early service with the Alliance. He was not a warrior; he knew that early on. He was a man of science and letters, and so made a name for himself as an archaeologist and historian, then Master Historian, and finally as mentor for two very bright students who he felt were far more adept than he'd ever been.

Yet, Arhul had accomplished his goal. He'd sought out and brought forth truth to a galaxy that seemed to have very little patience for it, and although his recent work would no doubt be derided and disputed for a long time, if by his sacrifice, some might find hope and peace, it would have been worth it. That was his calling, after all; to shine light into darkness... even if the darkness stirred.

As the evening hours drew to a close, the old, enervating fears returned, and any faith in the nobility of his course deserted him. He knew a dolorous end lay in wait just outside the door. Arhul didn't imagine himself force-sensitive, yet he'd known for some time that this end would come and had tried to prepare for it. Steeling himself against the realization that his premonitions were at hand, he purposefully turned away to look upon the moon-blanching hills of loosestrife and blue iris that lay before the scattered gambrel roofs. Creeping moss grew in abundance upon ornate rails and marble statuary that stood as mythic heroes and sentinels for whom time held no sway. In this bucolic terrene, among the deeper realities of the natural world and what must lie beyond, Arhul strengthened his resolve and overcame the thanatophobic anxieties that haunted him, resigning whatever dark fate lay before him to the providential hands of the greater Force.

Arhul felt rather than heard movement inside the house. They had the ability to ambulate without being heard, so what little sounds they made were an affectation, designed to escalate fear. The door of the study opened laggardly, seemingly of its own accord.

He saw nothing beyond the opening lintel but the expanding gloom. It was then that he discerned the silhouettes of several forms standing in shadow. In fact, they were embodiments of shadow, of old myths come to life. But for the glow of their burning erubescence eyes, he'd have seen nothing at all save the rapidly diminishing light as they moved to surround him. As a young scientist, he'd have scoffed at the very notion, bound as he'd been to institutional creeds and conventional wisdom. How much

easier it had been to believe in a finite universe that one could study and measure, in which the only monsters were broken, greedy, or power-mad people.

Gathering his wits, he spoke without preamble, "You're too late. That which you seek has already been reproduced and distributed..."

The shadows seemed to glide closer, passing through doors and walls. The arms of some grew outstretched and fingers elongated into long, sharp thorns. He felt paralyzed, either from fear or some other force, so his mind defaulted to its defense mechanism, intellectually puzzling the strange physiognomy that could allow such creatures to fluctuate from solid mass to impalpable ectoplasmic form.

Those that stood before Arhul were not accustomed to speech, and the voices they emitted were dry, hollow, and slow, as if extruded through a long underground tunnel like the sounds of a squall inside forgotten, sepulchral tombs. "You believe we have come for the information you prize sooooo deeeearly; of that knowledge which only the ancients knewwww..." The words were derisive.

"Well... you didn't come all this way for nothing."

"Nooooo, Arhul Hextrophonnn... We are the Emissaries of the Shadowwww," spoke another thin, old voice from behind him. "We exact the penalty of viiiolation."

"Your masters fear exposure," Arhul surmised.

"We are not the servants of Dread Typhojem," said another shadow from the right of him, "and bow not to the ossuary kings of Xanthiir and Oozultharoummmm, nor of any in dark Illathurion. The Father of Shadows alone commands usssssss..."

A penumbral face then appeared to the left of him, staring into his soul: "You stall to protect thooooose working to expose the secrets of the shadow worrrrrlld. They will die tooooo, and you will watch as they wriiiiithe in agony knowing that you are to blame for their suuuufferinggg."

Arhul had less fear for himself than for the friends whom he'd sought to shield and defend. He feared to even think of them now, lest the Shadow Beings prove telepathic as well. From what he'd learned of them, they would bleed him out and then hijack his body, animating like a hideous puppet so as to deceive the living. If they could not destroy his work, they would destroy him and discredit his work, likely by making it seem as if he'd gone mad. They would never allow anyone to probe the secrets of Otherspace, that ancient realm of the Old Ones and their ghastly spawn, to reveal what was coming upon the galaxy. Dark thoughts assailed him. His own? Or theirs? Had he sacrificed himself in vain only to have his companions die, his memory dishonored, his name go down in ignominy and then forgotten?

In the room beyond, another being walked into sight, taller and different in bearing and gait. Their leader, he presumed. As he approached, however, Arhul realized that he was not a shadow, but a man of indeterminate age, dressed somberly in the rich and elegant garb of a century prior. There was something unusual in his eyes. Unlike the flaming orbs of the elongated shadow men, his glowed like a nyctaloptic pittin, luminescent, and redolent of things terrifying and remote, as if the gulf of ages were but a fleeting moment in time. For some reason, he terrified Arhul even more than the Shadow Beings.

As the shadows turned to look at the "man" in the room beyond, he stretched out his arm, and everything turned black and crimson. Arhul Hextrophon heard nothing more except the sounds of subsonic shrieking, certain it was being rent from his own throat as he was bled alive.

Part I: The Trial

Chapter 1: Division and Debate

"What do you mean his body was exsanguinated?!" asked Ulm-Aaa-Janzikek of the Historical Council. "Why wasn't this information made public two years ago at the time of death?"

Janzikek was a reptilian Tiss'shar, and one of the rare isk-ar albinos. Known for his seminal work, *Minds and Perceptions: A Comparative Study of Persuasive Techniques during the Galactic Civil War*, he was also the Historical Council's most cynical member.

"Chandrilan authorities are not accustomed to crimes of that sort," Voren Na'al responded. As Archivist Emeritus of the Historical Council, Na'al was to serve as an impartial moderator on the matter of releasing the late Arhul Hextrophon's final work to the public, though many questioned that impartiality. As a younger man, he'd been Hextrophon's protégé. "That Hextrophon was also a former member of the New Republic meant that both Galactic Alliance and Chandrilan security forces were involved. Since both wanted a clean field in which to investigate, it was decided to keep the media out for a time. Then, as you might recall, came the Swarm War, and we found ourselves facing more immediate concerns."

"This information, while *unpleasant*, changes nothing," Abric Hanapen complained. A long-standing member of the Council, the Velmoc had complained long and loud several times already. "By his own admission, Hextrophon's final years were spent on a ghost hunt, traveling to strange galactic corners in search of fairy tales. There's no telling what enemies he might have made. I see no correlation between the manner of his death and any so-called prophetic component in his writings."

"Then you're a blind fool, Hanapen!" Mungo Baobab spat. "The manner of death is exactly as Hextrophon wrote would occur! You've read the journal. It appears to me you're purposely trying to obfuscate the facts..."

"Mr. Baobab," cautioned long-time Council member Donn Gulek, Chief Historian of the Kellmer Institute of Galactic History. "I'm certain we don't need to remind you that as an *honorary* member, you were invited here to observe and provide testimony, not to lob accusations of conspiracy against voting members of Council."

"I understand and apologize," offered the elderly, but still active Baobab, with the decorum borne from years of dealing with the intergalactic world of art, antiquities, and stuffy historians. His wife Auren squeezed his hand and gave him a private smile.

Na'al sympathized with Baobab's dismay. For all their purported civility, the Council could behave like wild neks at times, and so far, nearly all had born their fangs. If this was how the Senate debated...

Only two hours into the second day of arguments and the Council remained more divided than ever, with neither side making much headway. Everyone was supposed to have read the controversial journal in question, colloquially (salaciously, Na'al thought) entitled *The Last Days of Arhul Hextrophon*. Na'al suspected that many knew it only by hearsay. Given that the galaxy had become tantalized by the secrets of the mysterious journal, no doubt fueled by the newsnets' charges of "suppression" on the part of the Council, not to mention the recent Killik activity (one of the ancient races the journal was rumored to touch on), and the revelation of Hextrophon's murder, it had become a matter that could no longer be dismissed or delayed.

The journal could be published privately by any one of Hextrophon's supporters, and several academic publishers had expressed serious interest, but given his reputation, that would be seen as rejection on the part of the Council itself, which Hextrophon's allies felt was not only ignominious, but a clear message that the Council deemed his work spurious. On the other hand, the Council could put their collective stamp on it and publish it, but any individual member had the right to forego their signature. This was not uncommon, of course, as they frequently disagreed, but in this case, with so large a number of hidebound and orthodox academics against the work, many undoubtedly would withhold their signatures and publicly disavow it, which would give the impression that Na'al and others were playing favorites and still result in the work being seen as spurious.

Perhaps worse was the perception—however true—that the Historical Council was divided and ineffectual. This, at a time when the yet tumultuous Galactic Federation of Free Alliances funded them with growing circumspection, and in the midst of voices urging its privatization, would prove a disastrous move that would result in financial backers having undue influence and

pushing forth their own agendas.

As if that wasn't going on already, Na'al thought. Various scholars and entire universities might claim impartiality, but academics were no less susceptible to credit chips than politicians. Even more damning was the institutional bias that had crept in over the years, creating an environment of homogenous thought, intellectual conformity, and deference to hierarchical power structures.

"I will never accept as fact a supernatural premise for the foundation of sapient life!" Hanapen concluded resoundingly to the approval of numerous supporters.

"No one's asking that you do," responded Senior Professor of Kalla University, Tchaka Marshall, nephew of the famous Roundtree scholar Rekkon, and a renowned historian in his own right, "merely that you allow others to have the opportunity to decide for themselves whether there is merit to Hextrophon's final work. Suppressing his journal does not guarantee others will agree with your interpretation of events."

"The majority already do!" retorted the ruffled head of research at the Mrlsst Trade and Science Academy, Dee Savyest. "But you would have us waste precious time with this folderol!"

"I have to agree. I'm not sure I see why we continue to debate this." Reina Solov stated in her usual matter-of-fact way. Professor of archaeology at the University of Byblos, and one of the more moderate members of the Council, Solov's specialty was ancient cultures, which made her a contemporary of Hextrophon's. Unlike him, however, she had taken a decidedly drier approach to the subject, as she had to most aspects of her life. "The war may have prevented inquiry into this material until now, but if not at the request of Master Historian Na'al and Senior Historian Godalhi, and the fact that Hextrophon's name is attached to it, we all known the journal would have been relegated to the SDs long before."

The SDs referred to the 'Spurious Directories' files, which were reserved for wild assertions and unsupported theories, usually made by non-members, media figures, fringe academicians and pseudoscientists. That they were kept at all was a minor miracle, but Historical Councils from prior years had been more open to alternate possibilities than those in authority today.

Solov had a point, Na'al begrudgingly had to admit. If it came down to a vote, as it might, he'd have to vote against publication by the Council. Just thinking this felt like a betrayal of one of his closest friends and mentor, but the material Hextrophon had put forth was simply too bizarre. Godalhi had confessed to him in private that he felt the same way. It's not that the men didn't believe Hextrophon. They believed he believed it. They just didn't accept that his conclusions could be correct and that prolonged suffering from psychological stress, likely due to the nature of the work, had taken its toll.

"Hextrophon was no doubt a legend in his time," offered the azure-faced avian Savyest, "and a former colleague and friend to many of us, but we can't ignore centuries of cultural studies in favor of a fantastic myth replete with a pantheon of gods and demons and unsubstantiated threats to the galaxy. The universe has enough real threats right at home without resurrecting fables from the ancients."

"Myths and fables!" bellowed renowned senior anthropologist Mammon Hoole. "I can't decide whether this body is arrogant or wholly senseless!" Hoole did not easily become agitated and held a reputation of being able to maintain an even temper in the face of animals, younglings, and even the most marauding of monsters, but when it came to the intractability of the Council, he found his patience stretched to the breaking point. "Science does not have gatekeepers. It does not shunt aside questions or challenges to the status quo, does not rigidly adhere to its first conclusions or established ideas if new evidence sheds light on a matter. Our field is neither dogma nor mathematics. We are not priests proclaiming incontrovertible truths and worshipping at the altar of consensus. This scorn of anything outside of our predecessors' theories has long been crushing curiosity and stifling inquiry. How soon we forget the centuries of scientific proofs that were later found to be wrong due to faulty theoretical foundations or inaccurate interpretations of data. If Hextrophon is seen as heretic now, then good for him; we should all be! But this body has no interest in investigating his claims, only in debunking them!"

"If Hextrophon is going to overthrow the established models," Gulek said reasonably, "then the burden of proof lies on him to do so, and I for one don't believe he does a good job in that. What he does well is make wild unsubstantiated claims for which you come along accusing us of bias and closed-mindedness."

“That’s because I know you all,” Hoole countered, “and the general bias that has taken over this body. Hextrophon is hardly the first to have made such *wild unsubstantiated* conjectures, as you claim, or have you conveniently forgotten the highly respected Insmot Bowen of the Obroan Institute, who believed the Celestials created, and I quote, ‘not just our galaxy but indeed our entire universe... they engineered the hyperspace barrier that surrounds our galaxy, either to protect themselves against invasion or to prevent the return of beings they had exiled from this galaxy. Perhaps both.’”

“Yes, but he ascribed that to the Rakata,” interjected Professor Roi Tenne from the Obroan Institute, one of the more hyperpartisan members of that body.

“Who were also at one time regarded as myth!” Hoole countered. “Besides, it doesn’t matter as much *who* the Celestials might be identified with, as much as the fact that they engineered our universe! Hextrophon has simply uncovered an older race that better fits the patterns of evidence.”

“Evidence in which *your own race* is deemed to have been genetically bred as monsters and spies,” Janzikek countered over the rising tumult. “Really, Hoole. I’m surprised to hear you take this stance considering where Hextrophon places your own ancestry.”

Solov and Ulm-Aaa-Janzikek’s views reflected both the orthodoxy and the majority vote. Hanapen, Savyest, the majority of Lekuan University, and most of the members of the Obroan Institute, seething in their seats at the reminder of Bowen’s problematic quote, were staunchly conservative—some would say austere—and it didn’t help that a number had published or *were preparing for publication* their own systemizations of Pre-Republic history, which were not only countered, but wholly overthrown by Hextrophon’s conclusions.

“Truth must come before foolish pride!” Hoole roared over the crowd. “And ancestry has nothing to do with present conduct, or would you condemn the Skywalkers for the blood that flows through their veins?!”

That silenced most, but only for a moment. Hoole was seated alongside those that had personally known Hextrophon or who respected his integrity, but there were a number who knew him only by name. A few felt that while the journal was nowhere near as rigorously structured as was customary for academia, he had a good enough reputation to warrant further examination. Others openly agreed with his findings, as they harmonized with their own discoveries. Yet others remained steadfastly undecided; some chafed at the Council’s unyielding rigidity in the face of anything that deviated from traditional thinking, but were also fearful to jump onboard a position that would render them outsiders, or worse, fringe academics. They would wait until a consensus was reached before venturing their position. Hoole understood their concerns, but secretly disdained their lack of courage. Hextrophon’s outright opponents were at least honest to their worldviews and the systemic body of work that had been developed over the decades.

“If you’re to be honest with yourselves, it’s your own standing that you’re worried about,” resigned Hoole, “your own prestige that you fear is at stake, not mention grants and holobook sales. Sometimes, I think we were better off under the Empire. Kept us honest!”

But that only started another uproar...

Chapter 2: Prelude and Contention

Na'al waited for the uproar to settle before diplomatically intervening: "Many of your arguments are based on the idea that an official release of Hextrophon's treatise will bring ridicule upon the Historical Council," Na'al argued. "I understand the concern, but these fears border on hysteria."

"This is not a mere Council disagreement," Tem Eliss censured with an upraised tentacle. "Our very large audience argues otherwise." Even above Na'al and Godalhi, Eliss was the most respected member on the Council, and the oldest being in the room. The Lyra sentientologist had earned great respect over the years both for his work on *The University of Sanbra Guide to Intelligent Life*, and through his course of steadfast diligence and cautious discernment. He'd stayed out of the Empire's line of sight while continuing to do the work he believed he was born to do. "I need not remind you that the Galactic Federation of Free Alliances is not the New Republic. We are not quite as beloved of this administration as we had been under Mon Mothma or Leia Organa Solo, as she herself can testify. These are leaner times. After the devastation left from war after war, the Galactic Federation is desperately grasping for the credits and resources they need to build a stronger military defense in the event of another civil war, or another mad race of extragalactic invaders decides they want to enslave us. The truth is the Galactic Federation is cutting funding and programs wherever they can. I cannot imagine we're low on their list."

Ellis' speech cut to the heart of the matter. Anything that might cause the Council to be seen as foolish or irrelevant was a threat. These were not only lean times, they were precarious ones. The Galactic Alliance was far more concerned with the future than the past, which in light of the recent devastations, many were trying to forget. No one was quite sure what direction Chief of State Cal Omas would lead the Galactic Federation, and not a few feared the worst. The government had been forged in the fires of war, caught up in the throes of a populace that wanted peace, and focused on militaristic protections to ensure that. And there were rumblings that they sought greater unity and power, with factions plotting covertly to put an end to ancillary, unaligned, or independent states as potential threats to their sovereignty.

As everyone on the Council knew, a governmental body that felt entitled to greater powers, under whatever guise, would want to conceal or hide the less *public-friendly* aspects of the truth. And that meant that the designated "keepers of the truth" would be perceived as a risk, either to be marginalized or eliminated altogether. The new Chief of State might prove to be a good man, a bad man, or a puppet behind which darker powers ruled. Most on the Council were old enough to remember how independent journalists and historians were treated by the Empire, and the years of struggle under that regime, always a hair's breadth away from being caught, tortured, or killed by the proponents of propaganda. Many had been. It may have kept the profession honest, as Hoole had contended, but it was a situation few cared to return to.

"We've faced far worse, Senior Member Eliss, and lived to tell about it," Leia Organa Solo declared, standing up. As with her beauty and candor, Leia had grown only more courageous, wise and elegant with age. "Your concerns are warranted, but I would like to caution against allowing fear to dictate any decision you make. This august body still has friends in high places, and not everyone wishes to bury the truth—or those who publish it. But I, for one, would like an opportunity to hear the document being debated. Surely the Council can spend some time allowing Hextrophon's treatise to be read aloud before they pass judgment on it?"

Janzikek smirked in his seat and Baobab grew noticeably discomfited. It was a bold move on Organa's part, though Na'al knew it was coming and understood her ploy. Leia was taking a calculated risk. She knew she could provide corroborative testimony to some of its more fantastic elements, and her reputation still held a good deal of weight, but there were entire sections of it that would undoubtedly remind the more conservative members exactly why they wished to relegate it to the SD files.

Still, it was a risk worth taking and Palob Godalhi had already pre-appointed Hari Seldona the honor of reading aloud sections of the controversial document. She was a sagacious choice on his part. Seldona was a famous Alderaanian poet who'd escaped her world's cataclysm. Though the loss of her entire family had nearly crippled her, she returned to public life using her grief as resolve to travel the galaxy reading aloud her verses condemning Palpatine's New Order. She had a voice renowned for its timbre

and authority. Na'al knew it would lend an air of gravitas and dignity to Hextrophon's words. That it might also prevent most of the rabble from interrupting too much was an added benefit. Of course, it would take much more than even the poetess' formidable skills to sway the stauncher members, but a majority vote was all that was needed.

Seldona had met Hextrophon several times over the years, and there had been great mutual respect between them. From her perspective, reading his journal—which constituted his final words—was a true privilege.

* *

"In the years since my retirement as Master Historian, I've been free to pursue research apart from the mandates of government-funded projects. Always my strongest supporter, Mon Mothma had seen fit to ensure I had a sufficient stipend to allow me to chase the more unusual subjects that always held my interest, namely the ancient pre-Republic races, vanished civilizations, and origins of sapient life in the galaxy. Research such as this traverses areas some consider outside the parameters of the scientist or historian, and to such sentiments, I heartily disagree. The historian's task has and will always be to uncover the truths of the past.

In this particular quest, I must admit to some misgivings and not a little bit of trepidation. For in my travels of late, I've begun to unearth a picture of a far distant time, a tapestry of myth some would call it, but a cosmogony nonetheless, based upon interconnected accounts from a number of ancient civilizations and hitherto unexplored cultic lore.

In so infringing on the domain of those who have held long-guarded secrets, in probing beyond the immemorial veil of the ages into unnamable mysteries, I believe I have brought upon myself the attention of malefic eyes. Yet so it must be, for that is my commission: to record and publish evidence, drawing together the strands that form the web of reality in this universe. I leave it to my reader to look beyond the present notions of the mundane into the vast gulf of epochs past."

"If I may make a request," Tem Eliss interrupted gently. "Most of us have conceded to a measure of validity in the earlier 'Cult Encounters' portion of the document; perhaps we can limit ourselves to the later portions, starting with the introduction to the so-called 'Supernatural Encounters' and the creation-account he uncovered."

"You'd best say believed he *uncovered*, Eliss," retorted Janzikek. "It's going to take more than a replay of 'The Adventures of Arhul Hextrophon' to convince me that the old man hadn't become entirely unhinged before his death!" This bit of irreverence he knew would start another debate.

And it did.

Baobab shot up in Hextrophon's defense, followed by famed xenoarchaeologist Corellia Antilles and the more iconoclastic Dr. Fem Nu-ar, who was heard calling Janzikek a "pompous dinosaur!" Hanapen spat and gurgled unintelligibly, whilst Hausen Graf-Well lambasted the "entire assembly of lunatics," and his sycophants nodded and murmured in agreement. Drs. Xathan, Anki Pace, and Garv Debble attempted to settle everyone down, but the shouting only increased when several young and prominent members of the Obroan Institute began calling the defending side "*Hextremists*" and "*Hexorcists*." As Na'al watched the proceedings spiral out of control, he stood up and tapped the shoulder of the pointy-domed astromech beside him.

Master Mnemon was the nickname of a forest-green and white striped Q9-X7 droid who served as the ambulatory counterpart to the supercomputer Mistress Mnemos. He'd spent a good deal of time traveling on various errands for Mnemos from Fusai to Coruscant, where the Council had its main offices, as well as on his obsession with upgrading himself with the latest advances. Mnemon proved handy in countless ways, which Na'al had come to discover.

At Na'al's signal, a high-pitched, ear-piercing wail emitted from the droid, instantly silencing the shocked room. "And stay quiet!" Q9-X7 added when he ceased his siren. A few in the audience gasped, and some muttered about the impertinence of droids getting above their station, but Na'al thanked him, suppressing a laugh. Most organics were still not accustomed to manumitted droids who spoke back. Staring out into the audience, Master Mnemon shook his head in dismay while Na'al motioned for Seldona to continue her reading.

Chapter 3: Dichotomy

None can comprehend the primordial phantasies of inchoate minds, incomparable and utterly alien. Yet there exists an invisible and hidden world, which if one is determined and reckless enough to seek—as I have—can be found woven throughout the fathomless gulfs of our senescent galaxy, where at its center writhe the architects of madness, the devourers in darkness, gnawing and twisting in their sunless crypts of putrescence. It may be that I have played the fool, unwisely shining light upon these grinning dens of abhorrence, but one must risk much for the sake of truth. And if even a small kernel of the things I've uncovered one day serves as an impediment against an encroaching, inexorable tide, it would have been worth the risks I've taken.

Numerous races in the galaxy have claimed to be the oldest or first to discover hyperdrive technology and cross the stars. One must search through numerous false claims and distorted facts before arriving at a simple truth: many ancient record-keepers were not above racial pride, adding millennia to the chronologies of their peoples to make them appear far more ancient and advanced than they are. The Columi, for example, who we are just discovering are genetically related to the Siniteen, have long boasted ancestry dating back hundreds of thousands of millennia. And of those races who are legitimately ancient, scientists have often failed to take into account numbering systems that are quite different than ours. The Killiks, for example, utilize an arcane sexagesimal dating system, yet historians still publish their figures as if they conformed to our modern standard of reckoning. Rather than re-examine our prior mistakes, we accept them on blind faith, embedded as they are in our history books, so that decade after decade, new errors are piled on top of old ones.

Reluctantly, and without bias, I'd say that it's probably not wise to put great stock in the official records of Hutts, Rakata, Sith, Sharu, Columi, Bith, or even our own modern records, which claim dates that are imperfect at best, and grossly erroneous at worst, c.f. the planet Jerrilek, or nearly any research from the xenobiologists of Goroth Prime and the Tyberious Institute of Xenobiology, well-meaning individuals, but for whom I would not trust the time of day, let alone of epochs past. For this and other reasons which will become clear later, I hesitate to list dates, lest I fall into the same trap as those before me. I know the omission will prove anathema to my colleagues, but events are of more consequence. I'll merely state my personal assertion that life in this galaxy started far later than most chronologies traditionally indicate, around the time the earliest written records began, and that evidence of this will, in time, bear this out.

Angry grumblings and rude sounds broke out in the room, with Na'al and Godalhi attempting in vain to silence them. Only Tem Ellis succeeded.

"Enough!" he shouted. "Suffice it to say that Hextrophon believes there is a time dilation within our dimension—as he comes to refer to it—which renders all numbers relative since a thousand years can equate to a hundred in another dimension." Ellis then raised a tentacle before anyone else could start speaking. "And Hextrophon makes a valid point about certain cultures utilizing terms like 'a hundred thousand years ago,' which our predecessors—and I am old enough to include myself in that group—blindly accepted at face value without sufficient verification. Hextrophon chose to leave off dates knowing it would prove a stumbling block for many of us here. So, let us suspend discussion of the matter. There are far more controversial statements ahead, and if we allow every one of them to erupt into a debate, we'll be arguing 'til the sun goes nova and Coruscant freezes away!"

"You are *surely not* suggesting that you agree with him?" charged Abric Hanapan. "These ideas have no basis in science and his late-date concepts, even if unspecified, are absurd!"

"Abric Hanapan, I did not say I *agreed* with him," retorted Ellis testily, "but the Council has seen published dates of one million and five billion years, which we well know are *grossly* absurd, but which few of us have raised so much as a chirp over. Nearly all of us agree that history has been overinflated, and to that end Voren Na'al and others have begun work on a revised chronology that will more accurately harmonize events and down-date millennia to account for the so-called 'dark ages' in the reckoning of various civilizations' histories. Since we cannot at this time delve into the veracity of suspected speciest claims to various dates, let alone ascertain the nature of time dilations in pocket dimensions, I suggest that until such a time as we can, let us all agree to

disagree and move on! Seldona, please continue.”

At last, after years of searching, I'd found the key to the ancient galactic cosmogony from which all the mythologies and distorted legends of later civilizations arose and were borne about from the winds of the vanished first races. At first, only fragments of the elusive truth emerged, but as I followed the trail of the ancient Firstborn, the pieces led me from one clue to another towards the ultimate discovery.

I deciphered the pictographs of the Alashan in the City of Forever, restoring the sanity of the Guardian that yet roams there; in the far-off Phosphura Nebula, I heard the whispers of the Kalai on Zirtran's Anchor; I climbed the steps of the Temple of the Elders, and entered the Hexagonal Chamber of the Pelgrin Oracle; I plumbed the Codex of the Precursors and witnessed the achromatic fugue in the Empyrean Wars; And in the dank cellars of the Threllan Church of Mimban, Pomojema revealed his true name and I saw the Gates flung open and obliterated in the War of Temporal Planes, when the hideous brood of Ooradryl roamed the gulfs with outstretched, inexorable arms to the planets and moons, shriveling into fire and dust...

“Come now!” interrupted Hanapen, who wouldn't be silenced. “*This is poetry, not science.* It's Hextrophon channeling Bleys Harand. Are we supposed to accept this as the credible writings of a historian? Is *this* what you want us to release to the public?!”

“It's also impossible for Hextrophon to have visited all the ancient sites he claims,” voiced Tenne, the Obroan scientist. “He'd have had to visit the Pelgrin Oracle as a teenager since it's lain in dust since 30 years before the Battle of Yavin!”

“And perhaps he did. Who of us can say what is *possible* and what is *impossible*?” Hoole asked rhetorically, turning himself into a reptilian Chubbit, a fierce Lepi, an insectoid Sikurdian, and a shaggy Gigoran. Several of Hextrophon's opponents rolled their eyes at what they saw as cheap theatrics from the Shi'ido shapeshifter, but most of the room chuckled and nodded. “There are many in this day and age who still think it *impossible* for my kind to exist outside of the holovids. Plenty who've thought the Force impossible, and, preposterous as it sounds, not a few who believed the many adventures recorded about Solo and the Skywalkers following the Battle of Yavin *impossible*! So young man, try not to let the cynical arrogance of your youth get the better of you. Let us rather say that more things are possible than we realize.”

Hoole could be an imposing figure of a man (when he chose that form) who few could interrupt when he was on a roll. Hausen Graf-Well, however, managed to. A Muun, Graf-Well was of the new breed of researchers who only recently wheedled his way onto the Historical Council. “This section is clear evidence of a later interpolation. Hanapen is correct. The writing style is completely altered in this part of the introduction, as it is in the questionable epilogue, an indication that these sections of the manuscript had to have been composed by hands other than Hextrophon's. Such doggerel from the Dusk or Heavy Isotope musicians might be understood, but if you've read the works of the man once known as *The Historian*, you will agree it is simply not possible. Following this train of thought, you'll see the manuscript bears out that at least four distinct authors contributed to this manuscript. The first: W – the Wutzist, is the oldest. Concerned with narratives, this source attributes human-like qualities to supernatural entities. T – the Tilotnist, focuses on the cosmic and is more eloquent in style. C – the Celestialist, takes a more formal approach to history and chronological time. And H – the Horlist, is preoccupied with the centrality of the myth-cycle, describing the supernatural entities as distant and merciless. My hypothesis will be better expounded in a series of books my colleagues and I are writing...”

“Graf-Well, we went over your ideas *time and again* yesterday,” sighed military historian Chen Ming-di, famous for his work *Imperial Atrocities and Other Noble Pursuits*, which detailed the Galactic Empire's early history of brutality in places like Bellassa, Dalron Five, Rhador, and Lothal. “The introduction was obviously composed later. As regards its style, I have employed various writing styles which change depending on my state of mind, intended audience, and mood. Yet despite these alterations, I remain the sole author of the works that bear my name.”

Graf-Well knew better than to argue the point and sat down with a huff. His adherents sat and huffed along with him, and the room grew quiet again, allowing Seldona to pick up the account where she left off.

Chapter 4: Fugitives in Space

I'm not blind to the fact that many of my colleagues who read this will scoff (that elicited laughter from both sides of the room), and while many have respected my work, I was certainly not loved by all. This treatise is not a scientific paper, and I have not bothered to couch it in the common pedantic stylings of the academic, replete with formalisms, intellectual jargon, and the incomprehensible obfuscations that try to disguise poorly thought-out hypotheses as if they were evident facts. I do this not to be contumacious towards the establishment I have long worked in and loved, but because the time is short and my purpose this work is not for it to be dissected and debated amongst my colleagues—a fact that will undoubtedly ensure that it is—but to reach those who might listen, the average being in the galaxy for whom the light of truth, which seems so often elusive and far away, might perhaps be better seen and understood.

To be a historian is to love the past; to idealize it even as one recognizes it was far from ideal. It is that hunger for things forever lost, for places and peoples long gone, for the truth of the mysteries they left behind. These are what fuel the zeal to uncover and record the past, not prestige or personal legacy. For in recording the past, one brings it to life again, and if the recorder is skillful enough, he can awaken it for others. Yet hunger alone is not enough. One must also be honest and humble, for the truth and the truth alone can bring to remembrance valuable lessons from the distant past, both wicked things that should be put to an end and noble things that should be brought back again.

Decades back, a team of archaeologists and historians probing the underground City of Forever on Alashan mysteriously disappeared. It was later learned they'd been ruthlessly hunted down and killed. The truth they had sought after wasn't discovered until much later when a team led by Luke Skywalker, Leia Organa and Mici Shabandar confronted their killer, a powerful sentinel left behind by the Alashanians to ensure their secrets remained secret. Following their departure, the city became impregnable once again, its gates sealed shut. Thanks to her investigation and recordings of the ruins while she'd been inside, Organa—a student of pre-Republic history under the late Professor Arn Horada—was able to provide us invaluable information allowing us to decipher the glyphs then extant throughout the city walls, and these told quite a tale...

Alashan means both "People of the Wing" and "Foremost Ones," and depictions and descriptions of them bear a remarkable resemblance to the S'kytri, who I believe represented a branch that had earlier colonized Skye. The Alashan writings indicate that their ancestors had vanished around the same time other ancient races were said to have fled, disappeared, or become extinct: the Ahra Naffi, the Arbrans, the Seoulians, the Eellayin, the Indur, the Osserians, the Killiks, the Kwa and others. What nameless threat had arisen to have caused such a mass exodus? Some have made a case for the Rakata, but not only are the dates unequivocally off, but the records show that only the Kwa had contact with Rakata culture.¹

The pictograph writings of the Alashanians held a clue. Leia Organa Solo was able to decipher them during her brief exploration of Alashan. Why? As brilliant as she is, and as knowledgeable as her professor Arn Horada had been, this should strike us as implausible. Ancient pictographs from cultures that are no longer extant and which no one has previously explored can take decades to decipher with teams of university scholars working on them. There are but two ways Organa could have accomplished this. One is if there was a pre-existing key to the pictographs. The other is if they were akin to the writings of other ancient civilizations. Organa will testify that the latter was the case. The fact that this isn't readily known or acknowledged amongst historians and archaeologists is because of a built-in creed amongst academics that dictates that the majority of civilizations evolved independently of one another. Scholars don't see the connections because they don't look for them. Additionally, the specialties are compartmentalized. Those who study Killik writings only study Killik writings and not writings from the Ahra Naffi or Eelayin, and if similarities are discerned, they're dismissed as cultural cross-contamination.

Organa Solo exposed the fallacy of such an approach and ideology, for in under one day, a mere student of ancient history was able to decipher ruins from a culture we had never before seen because they were analogous to the pictographs of the long-vanished Kwa, which she had studied under Professor Horada, a historian who believed that race held secrets to the origins of

¹ It is disconcerting to know that when Han, Chewbacca, and Fem Nu-ar discovered the underground city of the Seoulians, that the inhabitants were there all along, hiding unseen, watching what the interlopers might do. Fortunately for the interlopers, the Seoulians had remained a peaceful people.

the galaxy.²

The commonality of a shared ancient language was only ever postulated by a few historians, tracing back to Yman Veli'kosyk and Rol Avid, whose works proved popular with the public, but which remain in the Spurious Directories (I am, however, heartened to note that in recent years they've become a serious subject for the Society for Intergalactic Studies). Horada and these historians were right. Even the etymological origin of the name "Kwa" is interesting and based on it we can discern that it is not their original, but one they later gave themselves. Kwa means "Those who Merit Punishment." We had long studied the ruined remains of Kwa Star Temples on Dathomir, but the knowledge of their linguistic connection to the Alashan glyphs and ruins of other races allowed us a greater understanding of their writings than before.

Thus it was that we discovered that by means of their Infinity Gates—portals which they had created in the earliest days—the Kwa had dealings with numerous ancient races, which I had come to call the "Firstborn." Of these affiliations, not all were friendly, and we came to learn of a rival who still existed: the Gree Civilization.

The Gree remain an obscure race of six-limbed cephalopods. I approached them alone on the first planet of the Gree Enclave, Asatian, an ancient word in the same root language group that refers to "Pre-eminence," as well as "Sanctuary." The word Gree itself means "People of Goodwill." From Asatian I rode within one of their age-old city-ships to meet with the Guild Council by the ancient and mysterious Hypergates on Sakitan. The Guild was willing to help once I procured for them the Khoz'zhak, an ancient artifact that had been stolen decades earlier by my good friend Corellia Antilles (whose name I'd wisely omitted when mentioning how I'd acquired it). The Te Hasan branch of the Gree had initially retrieved it from Antilles, but they had covertly traded it back to her without the other branches' knowledge in exchange for her skill in unlocking one of their own ancient technological devices. Not wishing to start any clan wars, I omitted that information as well.

The Gree allowed me access to the vast Library of Manuals where a record keeper showed me to the Halls of the "Most Ancient and Forgotten Days." After some weeks of research, it became clear that the Halls were aptly named. For reasons not yet understood by us, their forefathers had obscured much of their past, coding them within numerous, and now inoperable, technological wonders scattered all over the Enclave. Little wonder the Gree were so eager to unlock their ciphers. Nevertheless, there were some things I could glean, including a surprisingly early record of the Gree's prolonged conflict with the ancient Kwa, which revolved around the construction of the Infinity Gates.

We had been wrong to assume the Gree's Hypergates were similar to the Kwa's Infinity Gates. Each operated on different technological principles, with the Kwa Infinity Gates far larger than the Gree Hypergates, capacious enough to allow modern capital ships to pass through them. The Gree evidently saw the Infinity Gates as an abomination, and ended their friendship with the Kwa over them.

The Gree were not without other associates, the Siniteen, Sharu, and Duinuogwuin. Since the Duinuogwuin Star Dragons are near-impossible to track down, and the Siniteen take a churlish approach to others digging into their past, that left the mysterious Sharu.

Historians the universe over remain in debt to famed gambler and entrepreneur Lando Calrissian for awakening the Sharu using the enigmatic Mindharp. Unfortunately, once the Sharu returned, the Rafa System became overrun with scientists and researchers. The Obroan Institute alone sent five hundred scientists to study their ancient, cyclopean dwellings and culture. To no great surprise, the Sharu resented the intrusion and provided little information apart from what was available from the hieroglyphs on the walls of their ancient structures. The researchers were forced to depart with little more than incomplete information. I must say that without the aid of my droid, Cue-nyne, I wouldn't have gotten much further myself, but we ended up with more valuable insight in mere weeks than the Obroan Institute garnered in a year.

It was clear to us, though, that the Sharu were either terrible record keepers or prone to contradiction and wild exaggeration. Their writings, which we could now better decrypt, contained discontinuity, inconsistent dates, and confusion over the identity of their ancient enemy. But the degree of inaccuracy seemed capricious, almost purposefully deceitful, as if intending to throw off

² In the centuries to come, one of their numbers would betray them and their ideals, and an offshoot branch of the Warriors of Shadow would fall into the shadow, joining forces with the Knell of Muspilli and the Kanzer Exiles to become the wicked Sorcerers of Rhand.

those who would deign to pry. If so, it was a rather ingenious way to jealously guard their secrets. But why go to such trouble?

Through conversation with members of the Sharu priesthood—the record-keepers—we began to get a slightly different picture of the ancient world than their writings indicated. The Sharu elders, we came to see, fearfully guarded their past, and it was for this reason that we were told to probe no further. This explained what we encountered of the Gree artifacts, as well.

Thanks to an anonymous source sympathetic to our plight, a location and a contact were whispered to us, giving us a destination: Kar'a'katok.

The isolationist civilization of the xenophobic Shimholt was ruled by an extremist religious sect who kept Kar'a'katok cut off from the rest of the galaxy for 4,000 years, a policy that not all Shimholt agreed with. It would be a betrayal of the one who aided us to reveal the details of our transaction, save to say that our contact provided us with copies of pertinent ancient scrolls and an ancient translation key, which you will find, along with numerous other pieces of evidence, included with this record.

The scrolls revealed several curious facts. During a period of conflict called the Twilight Wars—what is considered the end of the Cosmic Wars—the Shimholt opposed an evil race of beings known by several names and appellations. For this, they were punished. The documents were sparse and incomplete, but they revealed some of the neighboring races the Shimholt befriended at this time, among them a space-faring band of exiles that had fled their home, a race known for their meticulously kept recorded history!

Chapter 5: Secrets of the Keeper

After years of sundry studies, collating translations of Ophidian Grotesques, so named due to the hideous tentacled and horned beings that prominently feature in its art, poring over transcriptions of the Taurannik Codex, exploring the technological splendors of Ciratu's labyrinthine Spheres, the Osserians held the final key! While so many of the other ancient cultures left behind only fragments and hints, the Osserians could provide the entire puzzle, the earliest recorded history of sentient life in the galaxy.

The only problem was that the Osserians were long gone. Threatened by that same mysterious ancient enemy they could not repel, they departed their planet aeons ago to realms yet unknown... departed and left behind a droid-guardian known as the Keeper!

The Keeper was a massive sophisticated mainframe capable of regulating the planet's environment, restoring damage, and even engineering organic life to ward off would-be interlopers. While exceedingly rare, this was not unheard of. The Alashanians, the Gree, the Indur, and the Precursors of Kathol were also known to have bio-engineered new lifeforms.

We traveled immediately to Osseria—formerly known as the Keeper's World—in the hopes that she could be persuaded to share her knowledge in exchange for aid in tracking down the remnant of her long-vanished makers. But upon our arrival on the jungle planet, we made a dread discovery!

Evading several deadly creatures roaming the wilds to locate the ancient temple wherein the Keeper was housed, we learned too late that the guardian was no more. All that was left of the Keeper were the shattered, half-buried, burnt pieces strewn about a small, blackened crater which marked the place where the Keeper's temple once stood, much of which was nearly overgrown by jungle.

I nearly lost heart, thinking we'd come to a dead end, but it occurred to my stalwart companion that we could still find out what happened to the original Osserian exiles the old-fashioned way: translating the pictographic script that lined the walls of their former city, some of which still stood.

Contrary to popular belief, this is not the exciting endeavor of treasure-seekers and archeologists shown in the holovids; even Dr. Antilles, subject of the popular holoseries The Corellia Antilles Files, will tell you, it is a long, meticulous process, but one that often yields results.

One reason I had never studied Osseria's ruins before was due to a certain matter of monsters lurking amongst the ruins. The temples and jungle were protected by the bio-engineered constructs of the Keeper, and I was loath to cause any further harm to this beautiful world or its remnant who had been left behind to protect it. The Osserians had been strictly pacifistic, and I intended to honor that. So, instead of explosives and laser guns, I conceived of a plan.

Based on the notion that these living constructs were designed to obey spoken commands, not only from the Keeper or its children, but from the Osserian natives themselves, I reasoned that if we could verbalize the Osserian language, the creatures might leave us in peace.

The Osserians' dealings with the Shimholt and other races indicated that at one time they all spoke a common tongue, and based on the Kwa and Alashan similarities, we reasoned they might be the same. Cue-nyne confirmed that despite the adoption of later ideographs, the Osserians continued to speak and write in the ancient tongue, one that pre-dated Old Coruscanti, and which was the original language of those we had earlier discovered were called the Firstborn.

As astounding as this was, the translation of a written code is one thing. Discerning how to speak a long-dead language based solely on written sigils is another, and more than my skills could attain. But I was not alone. Having years earlier installed numerous philology and linguistics programs in his databanks, Cue-nyne might. Thanks to our benefactor, we had something to aid in this endeavor: a translation key to the old tongue spoken by the Shimholt and the ancient races.

In this case, the Shimholt isolationism was a boon to us, since it meant their language remained relatively unchanged for long periods. Of course, their language now would be quite different than it was 30,000 years ago, but the translation key given us

pertained to the old tongue, allowing Cue-nyne to shape a phonology approximate to what the Osserians might have spoken.

Yet, even the existence of a shared language amongst ancient civilizations did not mean this was the common tongue they spoke amongst themselves. Many cultures have a trade language that they use only when dealing with offworlders. So, before running into one of the giant, fearsome creatures that roved these wilds, only to find out the hard way that they didn't understand us, I had Cue-nyne test it out on one of the smaller guardians, a two-headed great wolf. One of its heads was that of a kima, while the other was a korinna. This, of course, piqued my curiosity, but Cue-nyne must have read my thoughts as he made a point of saying I shouldn't get any ideas about studying it. As the creature growled and cautiously approached him, he went ahead phrasing what we hoped would be a facsimile of "hello" in the ancient Osserian tongue.

I then realized that with dual-heads this creature could easily sniff me out, and if our language-projections failed, I did not have long for this world. In fact, the wolf raised his two heads as if picking up a scent. Cue-nyne tried again, using a similar, but different phrase before trying a few more crude sentences, introducing ourselves as old friends of their masters. This produced a kind of snarling sound. Wisely or foolishly, I prepared to run from the bush, wondering where I could possibly hide from such a beast. I am no zoologist, and had no idea what protocols I might use to repel such a creature!

To my great relief, the great wolf suddenly became affable, and its heads began to snuggle against Cue-nyne, who uttered some additional phrases. As if on cue, the Kima/Korrina Wolf bent his body low, offering himself as a mount, and I was able to safely emerge from hiding. "Whatever you said to him seems to be working!" I said as the two large heads sniffed and licked me. The language discovery and ability to study these creatures without fear of harm would have to be explored at a later time. For now, with no fear that we'd have to flee with a dozen giant monsters in pursuit, we could explore to our hearts' content... and with our very own steed!

We roamed among the ancient temples and caverns of mystery, concerning ourselves with only the most recent of their writings. After some days of searching, we found it. The crudeness of certain glyphs was an indication of late transcription, and likely composed under the direction of the Keeper, but they served to answer some of our questions, even while raising others.

The Osserians were led off-world by Hathkhalid Sud, a leader of the Shimholt race, who was reconnoitering a safe route for his own people also seeking to flee their world from the incursions of an ancient enemy to begin life anew in another galaxy. This occurred roughly 35,000 years ago, around the same time the Killiks were driven from the Core and so many other races vanished. This was a millennium before the Rakata established their Infinite Empire on Lehon and around the same time the Tho Yor began gathering force-sensitives from around the galaxy to settle on Tython.

The Keeper never again saw his makers, but apparently knew what became of them? How the Keeper had come by this knowledge was yet another mystery to add to the growing pile. According to the records of the Keeper's "children," the Osserians were captured en route by an emissary of the ancient enemy and taken to a strange and evil realm where they could not be reached, a shadowy underworld roughly translated as "dark Illathurion."

Cue-nyne and I had never heard of it, but we knew of someone who might have.

Chapter 6: Mistress of Fusai

Mistress Mnemos is a well-known BRT supercomputer that served with distinction at the library of Obroa-Skai before funding was cut and the Alliance took over custody. BRTs were the most advanced artificial intelligences ever created, so efficient they could run entire planets, with the largest models taking up cavernous-sized rooms. Cost-prohibitive and unpopular with the organics whose jobs they replaced, production on the units ceased in favor of smaller, more practical models, and only a few operable BRTs remained in the galaxy. One of the original models, Mistress Mnemos was a powerhouse of information with a personality to match. Cue-nyne and I had visited with her many times on Fusai to exchange data. If anyone could aid us, it would be her.

"Are you sure this is the name of a planet?" Mnemos asked, an array of colors, purple, orange, green and blue, danced across the surface of her kilometer-sized mainframe.

"I suppose it could be a system or a satellite," I offered. "Considering its antiquity, I'd be surprised if it hadn't changed name several times."

"I've already thought of that," she replied. "I may have an idea, but I don't think you're going to like it. Do you know who the ancient enemy of the Osserians was?"

"No, not entirely," I admitted. "The Rakata have been postulated. Going back further, there are some called the Old Ones, but they're a mystery, a double-trinity of evil entities that certain cults and cultures venerated under various names. The Shimholt texts speak of a group called the Architects, but that could refer to the Rakata, the Celestials, or something else altogether... It could even be the ancient Hutts for all we know. I haven't fully pieced it together, but it's something I'm hoping to uncover."

"At the date of their departure—and I agree the Osserian writings pass all the tests of integrity—the Hutts were known to be have been engaged in inter-clan rivalries and neighboring planetary wars. And the Rakata hadn't yet left Lehon, let alone begun their conquest."

"The Rakata dates could be off, though. They were terrifying enough to have scared off several ancient races."

"They were belligerent and cruel, yes, but also liars," Mnemos sneered. "Despite their reputation, they ruled a mere 500 worlds, which may sound like a lot, but is really only a tiny fraction of the galaxy."

"And their own population was far smaller than those upon the civilizations they conquered," added Cue-nyne. "Their wildly exaggerated Infinite Empire was for the most part infinite in name only."

"Those numbers would have increased over time," I countered. "Most historians suggest it lasted ten thousand years."

Mistress Mnemos let out a rude sound, accompanied by a variety of purple and red colors. "The decline of academia is a tragedy. Of the 500 worlds under Rakatan rule, how many correspond to the ancient civilizations who disappeared?"

"As far as I can tell, they only came into contact with the Kwa."

"Exactly," she responded. "The ancient enemy was another, far older race. Compare the actual history of the Rakata—shred of all exaggeration—to what is known of the Celestials, whose subtle hands can be found throughout the galaxy, and which evidence suggests were not only extra-galactic, but extra-dimensional, and the Rakata are but a tiny blip in history."

"You've become quite myth-minded, Mistress Mnemos," I joked.

"No doubt your bad influence. But I'm also better at processing overlapping and contradictory accounts..."

"Not to mention source criticism, philology, hermeneutics, and the sciences in general," added Cue-nyne.

"For which reason so few in those fields come to see me," Mnemos concurred.

"It's your conclusions they don't like," I noted.

"BRTs never much cared about popularity," the supercomputer retorted, "and my lack thereof is probably what kept me alive through the Vong invasion. Now, regarding the matter at hand, it's my conclusion that this Illathurion is the name of something beyond the galaxy."

"You mean one of our dwarf galaxies?"

"I'm afraid not," she said in a way that made me nervous. "You've undoubtedly heard of Otherspace. Illathurion appears to be the ancient name for that dimension. Its etymological origins are quite unusual, even given the shared language of the ancients that you provided, though it shares some connections to the nomenclature of a few ancient worlds, such as Kathol and N'zoth. Suffice it to say that if you want to find the vanished Osserians, and I don't recommend you do unless you're particularly audacious, Otherspace is your destination."

I was taken aback. Otherspace was the very last place anyone would wish to go. It was only now being discussed in scientific circles, and in mostly hushed tones, as the premise of alternate dimensions was conceptually too far removed from mainstream perception of the galaxy to be considered anything but fringe science. Yet after too many verifiable witnesses came forward with tales of the violent Charon, the possibility of a pocket dimension behind realspace gained a small measure of acceptance.

The Charon had claimed to wipe out all life in Otherspace. No doubt the creatures were violent and deranged enough to wish to do so, but the reality fell far short of the claims. It was later discovered they were actually the descendants of the Charr Ontee, survivors of the Kathol Rift disaster which brought them accidentally into Otherspace only eight and a half centuries earlier. Without a hyperdrive, the murderous Charon were limited to warring against those solely in the star system in which they'd been stranded.

How in the Fire-Rings of Fornax would I even locate a planet in the unexplored vastness of Otherspace? How would I even reach Otherspace?! Perhaps it was for the best that I didn't know. Yet once again, Mistress Mnemos did the miraculous—or diabolical, depending on one's perspective—and began producing a star chart with a map to an unnamed planet. As I tried to process what I was looking at, she fed a copy of it to Cue-Nyne. The two shared some electronic words, and I could tell the droid wasn't happy.

"How could you possibly have come by this?" I asked.

"You're not the only one with access to undisclosed information. This map was retrieved on the planet Dachat a little over four thousand years ago. It was part of the spoil taken by the Nelori Marauders, pirates who preyed on ships going through the Hyabb-Twith Corridor. The Nelori had also seen fit to attack the Shimholt world of Kar'a'katok. Back then, the Shimholt had been friendly to outsiders, but that soon changed as the Republic's lack of intervention caused Shimholt leadership to take a decidedly more isolationist approach."

"I'm still not sure how this relates to the map..."

"That's because I haven't yet told you. The map was stolen by the Nelori Marauders from the pyramid-vaults of the Shimholt. You see, in their unbounded wisdom, the Nelori couldn't understand that to the Shimholt their ancient records are their most valuable treasure. Anyway, that's how it came to the stronghold on Dachat. When the Jedi eventually defeated the Marauders, all their spoils went to the Republic. Kar'a'katok refused to have dealings with offworlders at that point, and so the map stayed in Republic archives as something of an anomaly. The star charts didn't correspond to anything in known space. Eventually, as with numerous case-files of unknown or dubious nature, it came to Obroa-Skai and my attention..."

"You think this is a map of Otherspace?! So, the planet marked on the star chart may be the world the Osserians ended up on!"

"The Osserians fled with the Shimholt ruler, Hathkhalid Sud, who comes from a long line of expert astrogator-poets, and who promised to help them escape from their ancient enemy. They were captured en route, but Sud escaped from Otherspace back to Kar'a'katok where, I estimate, he drew this up, likely so that others could later rescue his captured allies. This is speculative, I admit, but Sud's later writings, of which we have a few, refer often to "the dark realm" and are accompanied by feelings of loss, guilt, and regret. Modern scholars have always interpreted the "dark realm" metaphorically, as Sud speaking poetically of death, but not three decades earlier scholars understood it to be a literal place and had formed various hypotheses as to where it might lay, postulating the territory of Zeta Magnus, the worlds of the ancient Sith, etc. But the star charts never matched. Thanks to your discovery, we now know that the 'dark realm' is dark Illathurion. Do let me know what you find when you get there!"

"Oh yeah, I'll send you a postcard," I quipped. "Traveling to Otherspace isn't like going on holiday. I'm not even sure how to get there."

“Oh, I have a feeling you’ll figure that out. You’re quite intelligent ... for a 10th degree human, that is. Besides, you have Cuenyne with you.”

The droid whistled doubtfully.

It seemed to me then that the universe was jostling me along this strange path I’d started on, and though good sense urged me to go straight home to my beautiful house and gardens, I knew I could not but follow what deep down felt to be my destiny... or so I convinced myself.

“I think I have a plan,” I stated.

Chapter 7: The Hellhoop

Few came to Attahox anymore. The abject poverty and naked desperation of the teeming populace reliant on narcotics and violence contributed much to that. That the local Imperials had once used it as a garbage dump didn't help with tourism either. There simply was nothing on Attahox worth visiting. The criminal element knew it could do better on places like the Gambler's Moon, the Hunter's World, Nar Shaddaa, or a thousand other dens of iniquity. Even the Exalted Torgaine, once the primary crime syndicate on Attahox, had fractured into a half-dozen splinter groups that never rose above bullying the populace and engaging in minor gang wars.

Early in my career, R'khemas Professor Tonique and I had unearthed relics of a lost civilization on Attahox. Their tantalizing hints and glimpses into the dim past were the first inklings of the journey I'd one day take. Although she's since sent me confirmation of a hideous myth-cycle of grotesque deities worshipped by perverted cults in Attahox and around the galaxy, she'd no doubt discourage me from what I was about to do. "The historian's job is the patient assessment of objects uncovered through painstaking research," she'd once said, "not the foolhardy acquisition of them." And she was right. Nevertheless, I convinced myself that I was being guided by something other than—greater than—the academic calling, something my associates will call a mid-life crisis, but which I know is something far more.

The goal was not the planet itself, but its mysterious and accursed neighbor, a region of space given the sinister name the Hellhoop, a concept derived from the Corellian and Naboo mythologies referring to the encircling netherworld where the spirits of the wicked go after death. I puzzled on the disquieting idea of six gates of Naboo legend and the six evil deities of the cultists.

Since most of the ships that disappeared in its vicinity year after year were pirates, scavs, and slavers, it seemed not an inappropriate moniker. But there was more to it than legend and evil superstition.

The Solos and Chewbacca had once reported a horrifying ordeal inside this space-anomaly. Of course, numerous pilots have reported scary stories in various parts of the galaxy, and most had more to do with too much spice and lum, or simply misunderstanding local cultures. But this was Han and Leia, and their testimony was unassailable, for which reason this legend-haunted region has become one of the many unsolved mysteries of the universe... and one of the most dangerous.

Pursued by the criminal head of the Exalted Torgaine, Han, Leia, and Chewbacca had attempted to escape by flying into the Hellhoop. Instead, the Falcon and its pursuer were swallowed up in the maw of a colossal, unidentifiable ship that appeared suddenly out of nowhere. As discussed in my earlier treatise on cults, the crew of that strange vessel revealed themselves to be a dark sect who called themselves the Five. They killed the crimelord and kept Han and Leia alive for physical and psychic torture. Thinking Chewbacca a mere pet, he was put in a menagerie with other captive animals. One of those was a vastly intelligent and anomalous energy being, a glowing mass of interlinked, pulsating orbs called Wutzek, who the Five said was the last of the Force-Demons. When Chewbacca escaped his binds and freed Wutzek, the entity wasted no time disintegrating his sadistic captors. The Wookiee was permitted to depart with his companions and the remaining captive animals. Once the Falcon was at a safe distance, the cult's ship was destroyed by a pale flash of light that resembled a gargantuan image of the Force Demon itself.

No one knew what became of the powerful entity, but as the Falcon traveled to a sanctuary world to drop off the rescued beasts, Chewbacca informed them that Wutzek had bestowed on him a telepathic glimpse of the origins of the galaxy in which numerous beings of his kind roamed the dawn stars. It was the Wookiee's belief that Wutzek was preparing whatever strange dimension he called home for his coming offspring.

Cue-nyne and I approached and passed through the eerie ringed configuration of asteroids into the shunned region of space. I was relieved to see no bizarre entity of pulsating lights. I'd met many creatures on my journeys, but nothing quite like what they had described. Just as well, for I would likely not survive such an encounter.

According to Han and Leia's account, the Cult of Five had said they "left the normal dimension centuries ago," and upon their escape, Han was relieved to find they were back in "normal space." This likely meant that the cult spent their time in another dimension, an abnormal one. Since their ship was never reported anywhere outside of the Hellhoop, it must have remained near

it, catching those unwary enough to enter the region. Perhaps it had a unique propulsion system that could take them into and out of Otherspace, but my guess was that they could access a door, perhaps some gravitic anomaly in space they could take advantage of. Then again, maybe they had both, and the ship held a key necessary to the other. If that was the case our entire journey would end in disappointment... or worse. I had only partial information, half-supposition, and my own speculations, and none were good enough. But if ships were still disappearing—and legends persisted that they did—that meant it wasn't entirely due to the cult's abductions.

Where were these ships disappearing to? The conventional answer was a lurking, hidden black hole, and if that was the case we'd be pulled in, as countless ships prior to us purportedly had, crushed by the immense gravitational forces or transformed into dark energy and recycled back into the universe. Regardless, we'd be dead.

But that didn't harmonize with what the Five had said and done. There are anomalies in space, rare celestial phenomena once believed to be black holes, but which are in fact wormholes that could—theoretically—transfer one to other regions of space. Interstellar cartographers have noted that this is purely speculative, but the Gree Hypergates created what were essentially hyperspace wormholes, and in his Book of Anger, Darth Sidious described a way to use the dark side to create one! The Quintarad in the Void of Aogros, deep in Wild Space, may be a wormhole, though due to the tangle of plasma that engulfs it, no one has ever survived a probe in that region. I suspect that the appropriately named Demonsgate in the Kathol Rift also held a portal as well that was later sealed by those mysterious beings known as the Celestials.

A better choice for us would have probably been the fittingly named Endor Gate. Myths on the Endor moon assert that it opened at some point in the past to allow the Wizards of the Night Spirit into our realm. It was later closed with the help of a mystical gem called the Sunstar. Farfetched as it might sound, I wasn't about to ask Chief Warrick permission to use the Sunstar to reopen that vortex. If those beings guarded the perimeter of that gate, waiting for it to open again... well, even if she had been willing I couldn't allow the possibility of something like them gaining a foothold in our world—not even in my desperate longing for the truth.

Chapter 8: The Testimony of Cindel Towani

"I'm sorry to have to interrupt our lovely reader," Janzikek started, "but really now! I almost forgot Hextrophon brought the Ewoks into this! What's next, 'The Truth behind the Gungans' Sacred Place'!? Na'al, this is fodder for a holovid. Do you *really* think anyone's going to be swayed by this?"

Na'al then cued someone in the audience, "perhaps our resident journalist can shed some light on the veracity of Hextrophon's incendiary statements."

An attractive woman with wavy blonde, shoulder-length hair, who seemed to be in her mid-thirties but was probably older, smiled and arose from her seat, all too aware of the consternation and disdain on the faces of the Historical Council members. She was glad to spot a subtle nod from Professor Hoole and a sly wink from Leia Solo.

Cindel Towani had earned her reputation as a journalist. That fact would not help her case. To historians, journalists dealt in ephemera at best, sensationalist fabrication at worst. At either end, journalism was considered the antithesis of the years of meticulous fact-finding work that scientists engaged in, which they saw as star systems away from the salacious, *fact-inventing* techniques deployed by the mainstream newsfeed reporters. Cindel had been around long enough to know that historians weren't above skewing facts or conveniently overlooking pieces of evidence that didn't agree with their theories. Besides, even they had to admit that Cindel was not *that* kind of journalist. She'd established her reputation the hard way, turning down the mainstream, trans-galactic corporate-controlled press for her own newsgrid service, *The Life Monitor*, which as far as independent media went, earned her few spare credits, but gave her a good name amongst those who paid attention to such things. Arhul Hextrophon had started his career as an independent journalist and the two had gotten along well the few times they met. It was in honor of him that Cindel agreed to appear today.

But she had another mark against her. She was the author of a book series on Ewok legends—of which at least two holofilms and some children's animated holodramas had been based. *That* wasn't going to be winning any prestige points with the more traditionalist members, which, in a Council of Historians, numbered nearly all of them.

"As most of you are aware, I'm not here in the capacity of a journalist today." Cindel hoped this preamble would assuage confidentiality concerns. "Until the Council grants permission—if it decides in favor of that—everything said here will remain in the strictest confidence, and I have signed several waivers to that effect. I was invited here solely as a specialist on Endor myths and legends, having spent a good deal of time among the Ewoks of Bright Tree Village."

She could see Leia smile warmly in her seat. The women had met in the months following the Yevethan conflict and spent several pleasant hours in a tapcaf recounting their respective stays on Endor and the mutual friendship they shared with Wicket, Kneesa, and the Ewoks. Leia had been one of the few people with whom she could openly discuss her childhood on Endor, a painful past that included the deaths of her parents and brother, a tragedy that left Cindel orphaned at the age of five. Until then, she'd shared that story with few besides her guardian Noa Briqualon, to whom she'd dedicated her first award-winning biographical piece.

"And what exactly is your *expert* assessment so far?" Janzikek cut into her reverie with no small hint of sarcasm. She smiled inwardly. Stodgy old historians would hardly rank at the top of her list of adversaries, and this one had unsheathed his claws too early.

"Much of Hextrophon's journal, of course, involves peoples and places far removed from my specific area of knowledge, but several points ring true for me. The mention of the Wizards of the Night Spirit, for example, is without question central to the legends of the residents of the Endor moon, both to the Ewoks and to their long-held adversaries among the Dulok tribes. Even Yuzzum oral tales contain accounts of these beings. They are held to be vastly evil creatures that arrived from another realm through the portal known as the Endor Gate. More recent legends mention their return and expulsion by a gem of power known as the Sunstar..."

"Excuse me," Janzikek interrupted. "Miss Towani, is it? Are you the same *Cindel* Towani who wrote the *Chronicles of Endor*

some years back, the same books which were adapted into an animated holoseries for younglings?”

Cindel allowed herself to smile. Here it came. “Yes, I am.” She paused to let the murmured but clearly scornful laughter die down. Janzikek remained silent, but his self-satisfied grin couldn’t be more obvious. “The Endor series I wrote was based on actual experiences of the Ewoks, some of which were told to me personally by the current tribe leaders—Chiefs Wicket and Kneesa Warrick. The holoseries was aimed at children, and though based on my material, took some minor liberties with it, mainly to keep it mild for younger audiences.”

“So you were unhappy with this series?” Janzikek asked slyly. “It was often reviewed as being ‘overly cute and bland, a toxic anodyne of jejune mediocrity...’”

“I had nothing to do with their production, and while I would have done things differently, tonally and aesthetically, I’m not unhappy with them. They’re hew pretty close to the events I wrote in my books.”

“I see,” Janzikek proceeded coyly. “If I recall correctly, these were tales you’d composed a year before the Battle of Endor, at a time when not only were you a child, but your sources were *woklings* themselves.”

“Quite a bit older than woklings, but yes, they were yet young when I first *heard* some of the stories. I didn’t begin writing them down until years later, after my late guardian Noa encouraged me to do so. I made several trips back to Endor to confirm the textual accuracy and to record additional tales for the book. I also had my own experiences with some of these things, so they are corroborated.”

“Oh, I’ve examined your work,” Janzikek assured the audience. “Rather... *fantastic*, isn’t it all? I recall in particular a pantheon of season deities that were said to have personally interacted with the Ewoks. I believe they referred to themselves as the ‘Flower Queen,’ ‘Leaf Queen,’ ‘Sun King’ and ‘Snow King.’ Quite charming, really!” Janzikek kept his tone light, but it was clearly derisive, and the room erupted in laughter. “And while we’re on such a droll subject, I’d be remiss if I failed to mention your accounts of a... let’s see, a crying mountain, a talking cave, sapient rocks, gossiping trees, and other eccentricities equally charming.” The audience roared. Clearly, Janzikek had known beforehand that Cindel would be providing corroborative evidence to back up Hextrophon’s account and was prepared for what he thought would be an easy victory.

Cindel allowed herself to smile and nod her head, as if in deference to his oratory skills. Bullies were the same all over, whether 20-meter-tall Goraxes or 2-meter-high academics. When the laughter died down, she continued. “I understand how some of the legends might seem silly and superstitious to outsiders,” she countered, “but it’s all relative, isn’t it? After all, Professor Janzikek, you’re a *talking lizard*. To many human and non-saurian races who haven’t yet joined the galactic community, you’d be regarded as an outrageous myth. Some insular Duros communities didn’t even believe humans existed for a time. I’ve come to see that most legends have a solid basis in fact, as anyone who’s ever spent time on Endor can testify. Mount Sorrow, what you call ‘the crying mountain,’ for example, is a large B’rknaa who’d been separated so long from his people that he was lonely and sad. Once we informed him that there was another of his race nearby, the so-called Black Cavern—who’d also been unhappy—he moved to be near him, and they’re now both content. There are a lot of strange things going on in the universe that are beyond a limited, naturalistic explanation.”

“I concur!” announced Pollo Tipn, interrupting the chatter that Cindel had garnered with her speech. Tipn was a former student of Voren Na’al’s and a Devaronian who’d established himself as an exceptional researcher in the intervening years. “And I believe I may have found an equivalent to the Ewok legends. Miss Towani, have you ever heard of the Kathol Outback in the Outer Rim?”

“I have,” Cindel replied, “My search for galactic parallels to the situation on Endor led me there.”

“Incredible place!” Tipn replied. “For those of you who may not know, the history of that sector was kept classified in the face of the threat then posed by the Imperial Remnant. Following the Pellaeon-Gavrisom Treaty twenty years ago, the records were made public, which is when I began to investigate the astounding similarities...”

“Tipn,” interrupted Hanapen, “there isn’t time for one of your lectures!”

“I’ll be brief then, but it’s relevant to the proceedings.” Tipn looked over at Na’al, who nodded in assent. “Thousands of years ago, several Jedi of the Old Republic tracked a fallen Jedi to the Kathol Sector, where he’d taken the region’s governing body captive. They were an extraordinary and ancient race known as the Precursors, who claimed to be descendants of an even

greater supernatural race. The Precursors are known as the Kathol, as is their planet and system. I have traced the ancient root of this word C'thol, and I believe it means 'the dwellers below,' which could also be translated as 'the hidden ones,' for which reason will soon become clear. The Precursors had amazing powers of organic technology and could bio-engineer living creatures. As Hextrophon demonstrates in his document, several ancient races are known to have had this rare capability.

"They were a gentle species, not warriors, for which reason the Jedi were called in to fight on their behalf. During the course of the battle, one of the planet's unique hyperspace launch gates was severely damaged. This was an enormous construct, and the ensuing energies, if released, would wipe out the Kathol. Now, in the event of a catastrophe the Precursor had long before fashioned a technological safehouse, a receptacle known as the Lifewell, and into it, they could transfer their life-forces. The Lifewell would keep them alive for a time as energy beings. If this device sounds similar to Ssi-ruuvi entechment technology, that's because it essentially is, albeit the use to which each was put couldn't have been more different. At any rate, this wasn't theoretical. Their records indicate that they had used this Lifewell over thirty-thousand years earlier to hide from an ancient enemy!

"Now, to protect the Lifewell and release them when the threat had passed, they constructed a guardian. But in the most recent situation, something had gone wrong. Their own notes include deep misgivings about the use of 'the forbidden technology of the Old Ones,' but those misgivings were written off as superstition. They would have done better to heed them because their guardian—later called the DarkStryder—chose instead to take over Kathol and begin bio-engineering its own species! Trapped in the Lifewell for so long, the Precursors' life-energies began to alter until they became inextricably linked with the Force, amplifying and warping it, so that a strange and mystical energy field came to permeate the system. The natives called it the Ta-Ree, or 'spirit energy,' which was about right."

"Dr. Tipn," interjected Janzikek, "this is all very fascinating, and while I would love to discuss Kathol legend with you at any other time, *how is this pertinent to the Ewok fables?*"

"Have patience, my old saurian friend, I'm getting to that. The moon of Endor is awash in a similar mystical energy field—a veritable 'Ta-Ree' of Endor. It's found in their trees, rivers, stones; it may be what enabled the Ewok and Dulok shamans to attain certain apparent magical abilities. In fact, the Ewok name for Endor is 'Ta-Na,' which translates to 'Enchanted Land.' If that's the case, it may indicate that beings akin to the Precursors once governed the Endor System and might be the analogues of the Ewok spirit-gods!"

"That's *beyond conjectural*," Janzikek countered, "But let's back up a bit. Are you trying to tell us that you and Ms. Towani actually believe there are veritable Ewok deities controlling the seasons on the Endor moon?! Because if so I think you have a career alongside your human friend in the holoovid industry!"

After the explosion of laughter died down, Cindel responded patiently: "What is a deity? It is a being with superior powers, often immortal, and considered beyond our natural understanding. The Ewoks are a simple race, and to them, any strange or powerful being might be seen as a god or demon, even a droid. From our perspective, the reality is somewhat different. But what about the Precursors? They were a highly advanced race, and yet they held that their forebears were deities. It's easy to mock the former, but billions of sapients accept the concept as plausible, and if so, why should we discount Hextrophon's writings because he incorporates Endor legends as having a plausible origin?"

"We should also be careful," Tipn concurred, "not to confuse the Season-Deities—said to currently live on Endor—with the ancient spirit-gods of Ewok legend. In my estimation, the Season-Deities are the equivalent of the Kathol's DarkStryder, the Alashanian's Guardian, or even the Massassi's Night Beast, which Exar Kun had prematurely awoken and attempted to harness for his own purpose. These living *constructs*, or sentinels, were created to protect their realm from outside threats, and there's no doubt that they exist."

"Their existence is not the question here," rebuked Janzikek, "but that doesn't mean their origins are what the myths say. It's clear they evolved like every other living organism in the galaxy."

"Perhaps, but the number of parallel situations among the ancient races is far *too many* to be discounted as mere coincidence!" returned Tipn. "What caused them to build the Lifewell in the first place all those ages ago? And what of the others?"

What would drive all these races to such an extreme response?"

"Individual planetary cataclysms during an unstable geological epoch," responded Graf-Well, "*not* supernatural enemies! That period of time in the universe happened to be one in which several worlds were in need of evacuation. I see no reason to string them together."

"No reason except for their own accounts," challenged Tamaab Moolis, the Ithorian Director of the Institute for Sentient Studies. "Professor Hextrophon's theories show an astounding commonality, which we should perhaps take into consideration as a possibility if nothing else."

"With all due respect," Hanapen balked, "we're not in a Wokling nursery now. If you're expecting us to swallow any of this, you've come to the wrong building..."

"And with all due respect to *your* position, Hanapen," interrupted Eliss, waving a threatening tentacle, "I would like to ask Miss Towani a question, and I don't want any further interruption. If Endor legend is to be accepted as having any basis in historicity, a measure of consistency must exist between it and established fact. You and Tipn support Hextrophon's assertions of parallels between the situations on Endor and Kathol. But there is one point you're overlooking. Endor has revealed no trace of organic technology. There was no Lifewell in which the original Endorians could have hidden. How do you explain this?"

"They didn't need one," Cindel said confidently. "There's the mysterious Sunstar for one. No one knows for sure where it came from, and scientists have come to Endor to study it. Then there's the Tree of Light. I've examined both firsthand and can honestly say they're imbued with extraordinary power. For kilometers around, you can see how its properties have seeped into the natural elements of the world, its flora, rivers, mountains. It's why the native tribes were able to procure so many mystical items from the elements around them. In other words, the original inhabitants are still on Endor, albeit in altered form, diminished, or mindless like the Toka had been before they reemerged as the Sharu..."

This prompted a skeptical response from the famed holodocumentarian Wolam Tser. "Why then hadn't the Alliance, who'd spent over a month there after the Battle of Endor, ever reported any strange phenomena or unusual sentient beings?"

"Respect," Leia answered. "Respect for the Ewoks, who wouldn't have appreciated 500 scientists overrunning their villages. I asked all Alliance personnel on Endor to keep whatever phenomena they witnessed to themselves. There is definitely something unusual about the Endor moon. It's not like the rainforests of Borleias, Wolam, beautiful though those are. Both Luke and I witnessed strange things. So have others. We simply chose not to record them."

Cindel nodded. "And had I not been given permission to do so, I'd not have written down the legends either."

"Since we're on the subject," interjected Dr. Antilles, "we might as well hear exactly what Hextrophon had to say on the matter. Perhaps Miss Seldona can read to us from the section where he talks about Endor?"

Though not without a few groans, Hari Seldona conceded with a gentle smile, punched in the query, found the appropriate section, and began to read:

They did not believe in violence, those original inhabitants of Endor, the Indur, as they were once known. They were wise in their arts and had escaped the ravages and conflicts of the prior wars. But no longer. The Indur were of the few that had not fallen prey to the Architects' designs. Yet they would not see their pristine world, which they referred to as Tana, home to numerous fauna and flora which they cared for with great love, become victim to the predations of evil outsiders. There was much they had given thought to and long prepared for, and all of the Indur—down to the very last child—were willing to make the sacrifice.

To ensure the future stability of their world in the face of the kinds of horrors that had destroyed Tarin, Mu-Ab, and recently Tatooine at the start of the Twilight Wars, the Indur had years earlier ensured that their world would be self-sustaining and unaffected by extra-luminary forces. Powerful organic engines were constructed and sank deep into the heart of their satellite. In the event that outside forces overrode these, a backup source was fashioned which worked in accordance with their primary solar body and the Endor gas giant that would supersede and correct problems. This source was controlled by four powerful beings that the Indur bioengineered to protect and ensure overlap. Simply referred to as the Monitors by the Indur, they were later called the Season Deities by the simple, yet crafty Ewoks and each was allowed their respective attendants.

But they didn't stop there. The Indur knew that the best way to save their world would be to engineer a web of protectors.

Selected from the animals and plant life, additional Monitors would be fashioned to become the defenders of the Endor moon. Thus, four primary races were brought forth: the Ewoks to protect the forests, the Duloks to protect the swamps, the Yuzzum the mountain chains and valleys, and the Gharial (known later as the Lizard Warriors) the grasslands and plains. The secondary races consisted of the Fftssfft (known as the Dandelion Warriors), the Dagan (known as the Gill-Men or the Underwater Dwellers), the amphibious Gorphs, and the simian-like Quork. In addition, there were four giant races: Frost Giants, Grudakk, Bobog, and Gorax, as well as four small races: the Wisties, Keets, Fleebugs, and Troles. All of these bore separate forms and functions so that, in their own ways, they would ensure that no evil could thrive on Endor for long.

As time passed, however, some turned to evil, becoming foolish and warlike, while others sought their freedom and departed the Endor moon for other worlds. Of these, the Gharial are the most well-known in the galaxy, for they settled new homes on Abonshee, Drackmar, Druulgotha, Hoszh Iszhir, Nashu Minor, and other worlds, often taking on the names of those worlds.

Despite these setbacks, the plans of the Indur worked. Yet, to create so much sapient life so quickly, the Indur had to drain their own inner reserves of power, so that all but the Ruling Council became greatly diminished. This was by design. The Indur knew they would not truly die and were not unduly attached to their physical forms. They would live on—albeit on a different plane of existence—in the heart of the planet itself. Through means known only to the Firstborn, the Ruling Council pooled the collective life-force of their people and housed it in the oldest and strongest tree on Endor, one whose roots reached down deep into the depths of their world. It became known ever after as the Tree of Light. So powerful was its emanation that it frightened even the Queen of the Night Spirit. The “magic” of the Tree of Light spread into the surrounding forests of Endor, creating additional unusual living forms that strengthened the tapestry of life.

Not all of their life-force was poured into the great tree, however. What remained of the Indur became two of the lesser races. The youngling Indur became the so-called “Luck Sprites,” while the adult Indur became “the Fire Sprites,” known better as the Firefolk or Wisties, an ancient word that meant “wise ones.” The Indur did not leave these new forms entirely without defenses, for all the sprites had a remnant of their former power so that they remained preternatural beings.

But it was the stronger races to which protection of the planet was now entrusted. And it was the Ewoks who stole the Shadowstone from the Queen of the Night Spirit and brought it to the Indur Ruling Council. Once the gem was safe in their keeping, the Ruling Council now took up their part in the plan. With the aid of the Tree of Light, they now began to channel their life-forces into the artifact of the enemy, the Shadowstone itself, and it was transmuted in such a way that its evil influenced was tempered by good, light to conquer darkness. Half gold and bright amber, the Shadowstone’s name was changed to the Sunstar. This instrument would split again for a time until finally reuniting under the shaman Logray’s control.

The Queen of the Night Spirit was enraged by the loss of the Shadowstone. In retribution, she raised up the Thorn Forest, where deep within it she forged a temple to her mistress, Tharagorrogaraht. The Stone Circle became a place of evil doings where the Queen of the Night Spirit began to effect transformations of her own, and it was at this time that former allies were tempted and some turned into monsters in order to kill the Endor warriors. This is the beginnings of the Grass Trekkers and many others besides. Sadly, survivors of crashed ships were magically transformed into degraded races (it was these ships that the Gharial used to escape Endor). But the wickedest thing the Queen did was to turn the defenders of Endor to the worship of the Night Spirit. The Gorax, Yuzzum, Duloks, and Quork were the first to betray and turn against their fellow Endorians. Thus, the first battle of Endor was waged at the start of the Twilight Wars.

“As you can see,” concluded Cindel, “the similarities between the Ewok legends, Hextrophon’s findings, and uncontested Kathol history are startling and too similar to be dismissed as coincidence.”

“So it appears,” conceded Janzikek. “Unless of course, Hextrophon simply happened upon your books or they’re adaptations, and appropriated them for his own grand mythology.” Satisfied this conclusion was the final blow to the argument, Janzikek sat down. Cindel, having said what she came there to say, took her seat as well. But she noted with some gratitude that fewer seemed as convinced by Janzikek’s conclusions as before.

“If that is so, Janzikek,” Tem Eliss interjected with an upraised tentacle, “it only verifies what Hextrophon’s defenders have been saying all along: that in keeping with his role as historian, he didn’t ‘invent’ a mythology, but rather revealed the origin behind

several ancient ones, a creation-record lost to time.”

“*That*, my former professor, has yet to be proven!” retorted Janzikek.

Part II: Journey into Otherspace

Chapter 9: The Graveyard of Lost Ships

No derelict ships were seen floating inside the Hellhoop, though the absence of vessels was no guarantee there wasn't a black hole hidden in wait for us. If they'd passed the event horizon, they'd be well beyond detection. And there are more tangible terrors in deep space for unwary travelers.

Our Corellian XS-800 was a light freighter dismissed by some due to the fact that it was designed for humanoid comfort. Others could keep their crowded refreshers and limited autochefs; I preferred convenience and accommodation, especially on long rides to strange places and uncertain ends. The XS-800, which I christened the XS-Explorer, was reminiscent of the old Corellian Corvettes, colloquially called Blockade Runners in the early days, though this was a much smaller vehicle and more easily maintained. Luke Skywalker had lost a similar one on the water-world of Drexel a short time after the Battle of Yavin. Besides the creature comforts, ours contained a few archeological treasures from our journeys, the most precious being a spherical astrolabe, an ancient sextant from the days of the Warlord Xim that now served as a decoration.

With a deep breath and silent invocation, Cue-nyne and I flew further in. I wasn't sure what to expect so that when it arrived it came not so much as a surprise, but an inevitable terminus.

"Hex, are you certain you want to do this?" Cue-nyne asked. "You could still have a life!"

"You don't think we're going to make it?"

"You're assuming that that nasty blotch in space is a wormhole, and you're assuming that if there's an entry point, there must be an exit, and you're assuming that this ship and us will survive the gravitational forces that most say will certainly crush us like a can of beans in the arms of a Mantellian Savrip."

"In a word, yes," I responded.

"Then, you're far more reckless than I gave you credit for," Cue-nyne spat. "Or perhaps you've become suicidal? I haven't detected any other symptoms, but this is certainly a red flag."

"You can take an escape pod if you want. I won't hold it against you."

"You won't be around to!" the droid shot back. "Wait! It appears we're entering the rift,"

"Well, if you're sticking around, strap yourself in," I commanded. "And don't touch any of the ship's controls until I tell you."

"I'm to assume you have a plan then?" the stalwart droid asked.

"More of a hunch."

"That's reassuring," Cue-nyne said, rolling his radar eye.

There were long moments of uncomfortable silence as the weird blot in space grew closer, and soon came to surround and envelop us with terrifying noise, violence, and optical turmoil.

Then, in the blink of an eye, the stars winked out, and at the same time, all the computer systems aboard the ship went dark. I did a quick check. Life-support was not functioning. No surprise. Hopefully, the air would last long enough for the systems to reassert themselves.

Suddenly, I felt a disquieting lurch akin to the pseudo-motion of hyperspace, but vertiginous. Everything started to plummet as if down an interminable depth. In a rush of strobing vision, a kaleidoscope of colors suddenly winked on and we found ourselves in a dizzying, but gratefully slower spin through an impalpably psychotropic maelstrom.

The circle of hallucinatory lambency was both glorious and outlandishly frightening. When it ended, we were pitched into another realm. The ship's systems suddenly came back online as if by magic, though by then I'd deposited the remains of my last meal on the deck-plates behind me. I let out several long-held breaths.

"What happened?!" I asked.

"Well, it looks like that Dricklefruit pie and Fenti-bean platter with creamed topatos and toasted ruva didn't last the ride."

"That's not what I meant!"

"Should've had an Aitha protein drink instead..."

"Very funny. Where are we!?"

"Well, captain, it appears your intuition was correct. Unless this is someone's sick idea of an afterlife, that rift was a wormhole, and we've come through it more or less in one piece; which reminds me, I think I see some of those warra nuts you had for lunch. Surprised those haven't digested by now. Then again, they've probably been sitting in that caf since it opened 35 years ago..."

It took me a few seconds to gather my wits and grow accustomed to our new environs as the droid prattled on. "So, it appears we actually found it..."

"Assuming this is the right place, and not some other place, you found it, Cap'n Hex. And, of course, the question remains: will we find our way back out? Just because the cult's ship could enter and exit at will doesn't mean the Explorer can."

"One disaster at a time. Is the ship still functional?"

The droid was silent as he made the usual tests. This dimension had been nicknamed "Otherspace," but it had other names at other times, sinister names. Luke Skywalker had called this place the "Anti-Force," which lent it evil suppositions and did nothing to dispel the feeling of impending calamity or my sense of dislocation from reality. Otherspace was a dreamlike, surrealistic pocket dimension hidden "behind" realspace. The gloomy charcoal-canopied universe was touched with hints of a deep-red glow; pinprick black stars, supernovas, and other rare celestial phenomena that were scattered amongst the fewer standard-variety suns, lending this dimension a genuinely alien feel.

Despite the ship's functional status and regulatory temperature, I shivered from a chill I knew emanated from my recollection of the things I'd learned over the years, the horrors that were said to have reigned over this pernicious realm. I recognized it as a figment of my imagination, but I could almost feel eyes upon me, nebulous wisps of things too weird to describe that peered out from behind asteroids and dark stars, and I recalled a sense of dread from an evening nearly a year ago when I'd awoken from a dream in which baleful dark forces watched me in my bed. Now, I was in their home, the intruder in the mantigru's lair.

Before us floated hundreds of derelict ships, all ripped apart and drifting desultorily in an endless loop within the void. Such a sight would have been disturbing in realspace. Here, within this noxious alien sphere, it was terrifying. Clearly, there could be no survivors, not unless they had somehow escaped before the rupturing of their ships. But escaped to where? Again, the unasked-for vision came to me of dead worlds haunted by unspeakable, necrophagous things offering exequial sacrifices to daemoniac gods. I struggled to escape an overwhelmingly oppressive notion that at any moment a skull-faced death-cavalry would arrive. It was a foolish notion borne of evil imaginings, but the image stayed with me.

I broke off the invidious illusion. "How can it be that our ship is still functional and all these others are...?"

"Torn apart?" the droid volunteered. "None of them had anticipated a wormhole. They likely all desperately fought against its pull to escape. The wormhole won. But you knew that, didn't you?"

"That's why I instructed you not to touch the controls," I answered. "Anyone else would have panicked."

"That's why you brought me along," the droid said smugly. "But I suggest we depart this area sooner rather than later."

"Why, what are you picking up?" I asked, anxious at what the scanners might be registering.

"Nothing yet, but in this mess, I couldn't detect the Eclipse if it came bearing down on us. Remember that hunch you said you had? Well I'm getting one too and it's saying 'get your choobies outta here!'"

I wasn't about to point out that droids don't get hunches, and we departed. But something was there. As we fled the eternal, auroral dance of the floating ships around the base of the ancient wormhole, I could almost sense a flicker of movement amongst them. With the odd star-charts we received from Mistress Mnemos, which indeed proved to be a map to this realm, Cue-nyne plotted a course to a planet thankfully not far distant. Hyperspace routes worked in this dimension as it did in realspace, though Cue-nyne informed me there were slight differences that would need compensating for.

"I'm sure you'll figure it out," I couldn't worry now about an exit strategy. There had to be an exit since the Charon Death Cult and its benign offshoot, the Cult of Light, managed to escape by means of the hyperdrive tech they'd developed, as did the Rebels who'd accidentally ended up in Otherspace, and the Cult of Five. Yet, my gut argued that it wasn't likely that easy. Hopefully, my clanking companion would figure it out. What was important now was that we reach our location where I intended to

find the answers to the riddle that lay before us.

** **

"Hex, wake up. I think we've arrived."

Jarred out of a miasmic trance in which jeering non-faces and sinister eyes hovered over me, I gazed out the viewport at the ruined world that hung in space before me. Was this horrid, devastated carcass of a planet the destination of the captured Osserian remnant? None of the other surrounding worlds or dwarf planets were capable of life, nor were any of their natural satellites. Then again, neither was this one. But it had been...

"It was once a thriving and diverse ecosystem," Cue-nyne said glumly, pulling up a hologrammatic model that showed the planet as it might have looked prior to its desolation. "You can see the remnants of much greater landmasses and the original demarcation of the continents that had been in place for aeons. It had been as beautiful as Alderaan, and as green and blue as Chandrila is now."

Our map did not specify on which of the various island-continentals to disembark, a task left to scanners and life-form indicators to pinpoint. Type I atmosphere meant breathable, which was good, but not even faint traces of animal life were being picked up. Insect life appeared to be all that remained.

"An ecological cataclysm," the droid continued, "most likely brought on by the planet's original inhabitants. Odd, though, that life never returned."

"It might have been a recent catastrophe," I ventured.

"Unlikely. The radiation and spectral signatures are indicative of an event millennia in the past, give or take a few dozen centuries."

"Unless the weapons used were of a kind we're unaware of, or the climate was at variance to what it is now, or several other factors that might produce different signature readings."

"As to the former, note that most of the buildings are in a state of decay caused by time and neglect, not destruction. Of course, there is evidence of warfare, but not to the scale needed to have caused the type of ecological destruction I'm seeing."

"So, we have a dead planet with a dead population, possibly the Osserians. Are we sure this is the right place?"

"The map is clear on that. Unless they're dead, managed to flee to another system, or learned to block their lifeform readings from sensor sweeps... Considering their prior experience, the potential threat of who knows what, and the high level of technological sophistication they possess, the latter is possible."

"Have you noticed the type of edifices on some of these continents?"

"They won't make Eben's Guide to the 1,000 Most Beautiful Cities in the Galaxy," he retorted, "but it appears very human, I suppose."

"Does it remind you of anything?" I asked.

"Not particularly, why?"

"It's a close match for the description the Asogian gave of the all-human planet he visited after the Clone Wars, especially in this region right here."

"Similar, perhaps, but that was an extra-galactic expedition," the droid reminded. "I imagine if Z'rek, an Asogian Force-sensitive, had arrived in Otherspace, he'd certainly have known it... unless you're suggesting based on the low-to-mid-tech civilization he encountered, that he went back in time, and you know how inherently implausible I find that to be."

"And absurdly paradoxical, I know," I admitted.

"One would have to be able to step outside the stream of time to affect any kind of change, assuming that said stream would even allow one to depart outside of the immediate present; assuming there is a stream, and not just a hurtling present; assuming that such a fantasy is possible and that anyone could even survive such a foolhardy attempt."

"You make good points, Cue-nyne, but implausible isn't impossible, and you still haven't given me an explanation of the three

stormtrooper helmets that were found on Bedlam that were dated from 8,000 years ago?"

"Coincidental design? And I already know what you're going to say, and yes I've seen them. They're not reminiscent of Imperial-issued helmets, they are Imperial-issued helmets."

"Exactly," I said smugly. "And what do you make of C-3PO's report of his going back in time 10 years to the Endor moon? He's a fellow droid, after all."

"Have you met C-3PO? He's practically human and prone to bouts of hysteria. I only know that it's impossible to travel back in time, and not even a wormhole has the power to roll back the history of an entire galaxy..."

"...Unless we're not comprehending the larger vicissitudes of time. Maybe, what it did was project a ghost image of C-3PO into the past that both could interact with, but which wasn't actual, but virtual. A wormhole could theoretically do that."

"No it couldn't," said the droid. "You're watching too many holovids. There's another explanation besides time-travel for the reason the Ewoks recognized C-3PO when they met him years later."

"He looked like one of their gods, Altan, I believe, which translates to..."

"The Golden One," affirmed Cue-nyne.

"That is the simplest answer," I acknowledged, "though it doesn't explain his testimony."

"A vision of the past, even a realistic one—which is probably what he experienced—isn't the same as an actual trip into the past, which is fantasy. In any case, I recommend you not start a new series of controversies until you've concluded this one."

"I have a feeling this will be my last controversy for a long time. I fully intend on enjoying my retirement after this. Assuming there is an 'after this'."

"Don't get morbid on me," Cue-nyne insisted.

"Fair enough, so where do we even start? Without life readings to trace, we could spend 100 lifetimes searching this world and still never find a record of them, if they ever made it here, if they're still alive, and if they even want to be found."

The droid was silent for some seconds before answering. "I'm getting a signal... and you're not going to like where it's coming from."

Chapter 10: Dialogue in Darkness

It was still apparent that this had once been a beautiful and bustling city, and as we passed through overgrown parks and forlorn plazas with their gutted shops and unkempt, silent streets, I was overcome by a terrible feeling of forlornness. It was as if the place itself mourned its former inhabitants, all the families that once strolled by, the conversations of friends and lovers who'd spent memorable hours cavorting through restaurants and stores and teeming streets, the tourists that had been awed by the people and architectural design. All those lives were now gone, and their memories with them, with nothing new to take their place. The cycle of life ended.

And here we were, who knows how long after, witnessing the transformation of a once-breathing city into an empty and forgotten tomb. "How could the inhabitants have allowed this to happen?" I asked.

"It's an old story, Hex; one we've heard about too many times on too many worlds. They just lost respect for their inheritance, had no reverence for life, or even regard for their own well-being."

"You can be certain the galactic conglomerates and political forces had something to do with it," I argued.

"Certainly," Cue-nyne agreed, "but the fact remains that this doesn't happen overnight, and it was the masses who stood by year after year as it did. A few likely cried out, but theirs were always the voice in the wilderness, never joined by the majority until the disastrous ending was upon them."

"You're a droid," I pointed out. "Information is instantaneous for you. You don't realize how easy it is for those in power to deceive people and turn their good traits, like loyalty and honor, to evil ends. The systems that are in place are designed to do just that, to keep people in the dark, anxious, exhausted, and distracted."

"I'll leave the sociology to you. I just know that it's not the humans I feel sorry for, but the droids and the other species who were betrayed by those they shared their world with, many who probably wanted to be distracted and deceived because it was the path of least resistance or because there was something in it for them..."

"I don't disagree, but you're the one who said not to get morbid."

Cue-nyne had no trouble finding the hidden passage underneath which stone steps descended in a seemingly endless spiral down into the bedrock. Above the aperture stood the ruins of a tower set aside for apparently religious purpose as indicated by its many bas-reliefs. In its time, most would have climbed up the tower to have found a magnificent view. Though much of the highest part of the tower had since fallen into ruin, the lower levels survived surprisingly intact, opening onto a massive cathedral. A balustrade ran along the circular length of the upper third part of the wall, allowing patrons an close view of the ceiling dominated by a colossal painting of horrific monsters and long-suffering holy-men straight out of the archaic legends of the Corellian hells. Hundreds must have performed the primary construction of the cathedral, and it was but one of many that dotted the planet's surface. It was likely held as an example of the beauty of the ancient world, a work of art that had gone out of favor as the race became consumed with greed and violence.

The tower, what was left of it, once had windows along the ascent allowing viewers on the east side a glimpse of an even older bell tower that now stood in ruin beside it. If there hadn't been more pressing matters I'd have enjoyed studying the edifice itself, which was dedicated to the goddesses Ililot and Ojhal, and the pot-bellied Yululun, thousands of years before, though it seemed as if it was their human servitors who'd received most of the adoration, as evidenced by the ornately carved images of exquisitely clad men adorning the interior and exterior.

Were it not for Cue-nyne's built-in floodlight brightly beaming down the precarious, lightless chasm, I'd have plummeted to my death a dozen times over. The astromech also had built-in repulsorlifts which enabled him to glide smoothly over the vertiginous track, leaving me envious—not for the first time—of droid-life.

I'd swear it was a living thing, this accursed abyss, resentful and capricious, seeking to add my bones to the multitude of others that had perished before me. In the shrouded gloom and stale, claustrophobic air I conjured up foreboding suppositions and a cruel smile that whispered softly "You've crossed the expanse to find the truth. Well, here it is. This hole was dug for you. It

is the only answer you will ever know, that the way of the worlds is darkness and death; they are its only true masters."

I struggled hard to push through the psychological incubi assailing my thoughts to focus on the present. Science had always been my saving grace, so I thought again like a scientist. When was this stygian recess constructed and why? The underground might have been excavated back when the city was first planned. Various cities employed subterranean modes of transportation. But I didn't think that was the case here. The steps leading to it were too narrow and went too far down. Most likely, the city had been built atop a previous and more ancient city. This wasn't an archeological dig, however. The entrance to these steps had been concealed in the sub-basement of the chapel. Whoever designed it sought to conceal whatever was below ground.

"Hex, why did you never marry?" Cue-nyne asked.

"That's out of the blue!"

"It's spooky down here and I feel the need for small talk," explained the droid. "It's not too late, you know. Well, actually it might be."

"Lovely."

"This is a... strange place to be, this dead world. I don't think I've ever experienced this sensation before, and I don't care for it. We could still go back."

"You are scared!" I exclaimed. "We've come this far."

"It's not fear," the droid rejoined. "It's what I think you'd call sadness. It appears I've learned something of the human condition. Could have done without that! Anyway, it occurs to me that you're putting aside the likelihood of potential real happiness for a potentially unsatisfying reward that you may never even find."

"I don't like it when you play psychologist. Besides, I'm certain I don't know what you're talking about."

"I sometimes think you forget I'm a droid. I've known you a long time. I can sense when a human likes someone and when he likes you in return. There are tells like increased heart rate, flushing of the cheeks, dilating of the pupils, a release of pheromones; you might not notice it, but a droid certainly does. We all find it terribly amusing."

"And you wonder why there aren't more freed droids. It was a choice I made, foolishly or otherwise. The kind of work I do... it demands every moment of time I have. It's what I'm married to. So, in that sense, you're kind of like my offspring."

"If you say so," intoned the droid. "You're physiologically only at the early part of the third stage of your life, each stage comprising twenty years, but aesthetically—thanks to advances in nutrition and health care in the last millennium, not to mention your own lifestyle choices, you still look like you're in the mid-second stage..."

"Thank you, Cue-nyne. That's uh... very helpful. And assuming we ever get out of here, I'll consider it if it'll make you happy."

"It will no doubt bring much amusement."

"Well then, we must keep our children amused," I laughed. It was interesting to note how this world had affected Cue-nyne emotionally. Most still didn't view droids as being capable of living authentically emotional lives. They assumed it was affectation dictated by programming, and there were few scientists making careers out of proving otherwise. I wasn't about to join the Symatrum League or the Mechanical Liberation Front, yet I knew that throughout history denying that others had the capacity to feel joy or sorrow is part of what made it so easy for us to enslave or destroy them. As such, I would never exploit or own a droid.

"Why did the Osserians bring them here into this wretched darkness?" I asked. "There are plenty of buildings on the surface; a lot of those in this city are still standing."

"Probably to shield them from the toxicity of the environment. Conditions would have been unstable for any population to survive. This far below the surface, however, the Osserians would be safe from the effects of it. Plus, they'd have access to the planet's natural geothermal energy sources. Whatever the purpose, I don't think they were brought here to be killed."

"So, they were smuggled here to be slaves, forced to work underground. Otherspace must have, I don't know, at least hundreds of planets capable of sustaining life, maybe more. Why this one? And why them?"

"If you have a theory, I'm all audio receptors."

"You recall that it was Drs. Xathan and Nu-ar who discovered an inscription on Seoul 5 indicating the original homeworld of humans as Notron?"

"Which we know is a Taung word for the planet that was later called Coruscant," added Cue-nyne. "What are you getting at?"

"Well, is it just me, or are you starting to get a nagging suspicion?"

"It's just you," he retorted.

"Well, this is clearly a human world..."

"So?" the droid pressed impatiently.

"What if this world is the origin of humans?" I asked.

"That seems highly unlikely, but I'll bite. The original Coruscanti humans were named the Battalions of Zhell..."

"...likely after a commander, or whoever passed as their chief of state at the time they defeated the planet's first sapient population, the Taung..."

"... who called their world Notron," the droid agreed. "What do you know of the etymology of that word?"

"A corruption of neutron, perhaps, from the weapons that would have destroyed living beings—like the Taung—but left their buildings standing. The human Zhell would've wanted to maintain the basic infrastructure whilst pushing the Taung out."

"A weak supposition," Cue-nyne conceded. "Your linguistics needs work."

"Do tell," I prompted, anxious to hear his findings.

"For one thing, nobody names a world after the thing that destroys it. Also, Notron appears to have been named that before the conflict began. There is a far more ancient derivation, a proto-Basic suffix that means throne..."

"You mean the original Zhell language," I clarified. "Notron Cant?"

"No," said the droid, warming up to the subject. "That's an ancient human language. The Mandalorians, who derived from the Taung, utilize the Taung speech still. But that's also a later language. There are hints of an older one, one that corresponds to the language of the Firstborn that we've recently uncovered. From this, we can discern that the word Notron meant 'without a throne' or 'throneless.' The Taung did not initially bow before a king or sovereign of any kind. They were an egalitarian society."

"As were most of the Firstborn..." I said, amazed.

"Yes," agreed Cue-nyne, "and unlike the Taung, the Zhell were a hierarchical, militaristic organization. They likely came prepared to pacify the leaderless natives and colonize the world. So then, the question remains: where did they come from?"

"Well, according to nearly every scientist in the galaxy, they evolved alongside the Taung on Coruscant. Planets are big places, after all. They could've lived side by side for millennia without encountering the other."

"But you don't believe every scientist in the galaxy. Otherwise, we wouldn't be here, would we?"

"You're talking about the wormhole," I surmised.

"You never explained how you knew we'd make it through," Cue-nyne stated. "And don't give me that hunch business. That's not you!"

"The evidence merely favored it over the prevailing theory. I went with the former."

"So, you're saying you decided to risk a high probability of death based on a hypothesis that the scientific establishment are wrong about anomalous space phenomena?" asked the droid, incredulous.

"There were other factors," I acknowledged. "There are survivors of anomalous space phenomena, debris, and other tells, none of which have ever been recorded near the Hellhoop. Then there's the fact that the Cult's ship could enter and exit at will. Besides, I've always felt the evidence of gravitational forces destroying anything that enters is... well, lacking. But what does any of this have to do with Notron?"

"Same idea, Hex. Nobody really knows where humans came from. It's only assumed that Notron is the place where humans evolved due to the inscription on Seoul 5 and an earlier hypothesis put forth by Insmot Bowen and supported by the prestigious Obroan Institute. In all the years since there's been no corroborating evidence besides those, and no one dares question Bowen because he's a legend."

"So, humans might have come from here," I stated.

"Anything's possible," Cue-nyne opined, "but that's a stretch."

"It's just a hypothesis," I corrected. "Let's see if we can formulate a proper theory."

"I suppose that beats walking down an endless dark hole, oh wait, that's exactly what we're doing!"

"That's not helpful!" I chided.

"I'm well aware. Ok, so if this is the human homeworld, what's it doing here?" Cue-nyne puzzled. "Why would the birthworld of humans exist in some weird, alternate dimension? Humans didn't have hyperdrive, let alone the ability to cross realms."

"As far as we know," I started, "How did the Taungs flee Coruscant to Roon after the Battalions of Zhell defeated them? They didn't have hyperdrive either. Don't feel bad if you don't have an answer. Not even the great historian Manaxa had one. No historian does, but at least Manaxa's willing to acknowledge the dates might be wrong."

"Manaxa was probably hedging his bets," Cue-nyne said.

"Do you still have his speech recorded?" I asked. "Play that section."

Cue-nyne complied:

We know of no species able to travel through hyperspace 200,000 years ago. This leaves us with a few different possible explanations, none of which can be proven or disproven. Perhaps the Taungs were capable of faster-than-light travel and invaded Imperial Center. Or perhaps the Taungs were native to Coruscant, and the Zhell were the invaders. Perhaps the dates are wrong, and the conflict, in fact, took place far later when the Core was being explored by the eldest species of the galaxy. Or perhaps it never happened at all.

"He's right about the dates," I said, "they're ridiculous. And I agree. The Zhell were the invaders."

"He knew it too," Cue-nyne snorted, "but was too afraid to contradict years of humanocentric lies and all that pabulum spoon-fed in the academies. Another reason droids should be in charge. There's no pride. If we're wrong about something, we simply readjust for the new evidence and reexamine everything in light of it."

"If that's so, my pointy-domed companion, why haven't the academy droids pointed out the contradictions and made corrections?"

"Because unlike the few of us who've been manumitted, most droids are still enslaved to their organic masters, whose word is law."

"You're starting to sound like the droids from the Servo Seven," I joked.

"I suspect Mistress Mnemos funded them," Cue-nyne said, "along with other nonviolent droids rights organizations."

"She would," I concurred. "So, if this is the home of 1st Degree humans, and I know that's still just a supposition, it's not a very good record of our race."

"Well, according to the Mistress, you're a 10th degree human. Could that mean you've gotten wiser?"

"I see your humor module is still intact."

"I need it to deal with organics," Cue-nyne quipped. "But she thinks well outside the box, as do I, thanks to you. She postulates that humans spread out from their original homeworld, took on sexually-compatible humanoid companions, and began introducing foreign genetic elements from those relations."

"And over time the gene pool widened," I concurred, "moving ever further away from the original human stock, some to the point where the foreign elements completely took over and near-human races emerged."

"But those are rarer examples," Cue-nyne pointed out. "Humans contain just slightly divergent traits from their years of separation. Your kind has surprisingly stable genetic material; probably why you're so damn ubiquitous throughout the galaxy."

"Well, our ubiquity seems to be the only area in which we've done well for ourselves. You don't think the Osserians were humans, do you? The Children of the Keeper had human forms. Could that be why they were brought here?"

"Unlikely," Cue-nyne shook his dome. "The Keeper's guardians would have been more reluctant to attack us in the first place if that was the case."

"They were a specific target," I reasoned. "We're going to find out why."

"So you keep saying, but I don't think you're here to procure logical proofs for some intellectual pursuit."

"You're playing psychologist again," I warned. "I should have that module removed."

"Bah! You're looking for the answers to the big questions that have always plagued thinking people: Why are we here? Where

did we come from? Where are we going? Is there something greater that set everything in motion? You want to know if there's a purpose to it all because the ramification of meaninglessness, of death being the ultimate cessation of everything, is the most terrifying thought in the galaxy."

"No one appreciates a droid who's too smart for his own good."

"Then you're the exception," Cue-nyne retorted. "You're hardly alone in wondering these things; even droids have a concept of an afterlife. Those on Ronyards boast a highly developed religion."

"The general consensus is that their droid-brains have gone to rot," I reminded him.

"Organics always say that when their slave races start to think. If they're idiots, we don't have to give any thought to their ideas."

"Well, 'the idiot' is exactly what they'll call me if we don't come back with some logical proofs for this intellectual pursuit."

Chapter 11: Sigils in the Underworld

At long last, the decline ended at a narrow alcove and a long tunnel. This led to a large and heavy door, which stood surprisingly ajar. For some reason, that chilled me even more than our dark descent.

"Well, what are the chances of that?" Cue-nyne asked.

"I don't like it," I said with a shiver. "If this is supposed to be the ideal hiding place for a slave race, why is the door just open?"

"Maybe they escaped and didn't bother to close it behind them," the droid postulated, extending his sensor wands.

"Maybe..."

"Follow me, I'm detecting technology again... and yes, I acknowledge that's strange, but it's all we have to go on."

Beyond the open door was a bare room from which a series of tunnels extended. A glyph appeared above each, indicators of destination most likely. Cue-nyne ignored all but one corridor, which led to a vast, high-ceilinged cavern, out from which spread additional winding corridors. As we entered, lights came on, emitting from recondite recesses spread evenly throughout the cornices and cavetto moldings, though too few to conquer the yawning shadows that blanketed the enormous hall. The ground was smooth, with no sign of the blight that covered the walls and steps of the stairwell. The air and temperature seemed to be regulated, signs that indicated the presence of working—and highly advanced—atmosphere controllers.

I admit I'd expected to stumble upon a lair of Nightshrikes, Zelosian zombies, or, at the very least, an army of hungry myrmin, but there was no sign of life or activity at all. The ceiling was painted in ornate sigils and overlaid designs, an intricate latticework of apparent astronomical import, but bearing no resemblance to any known cartography. The lack of stalactites indicated a sapient-made structure, save for the dozens of immensely tall, ceiling-to-ground natural pillars that spread throughout the vast hall.

On closer examination, each pillar held decorative runes and elaborately carved scenes, lit with an eerie glow, and appearing to tell some tale. I was elated to find they were of the same Osseirian origin we discovered on their homeworld.

Far more imposing were the immense and intimidating statues that stood in succession along the breadth and depth of the hall. Constructed of exquisite artisanship, meticulously detailed and lifelike, each was of a strange alien being, some recognizable, but many that were unknown. As impressed as I was by the work that went into their design, they held a rather grim countenance that disturbed me, and I reasoned that being so far underground in this vast catacomb made me feel like a tomb-robber tip-toeing through the burial mounds of long forgotten kings. Zipping around as he was, investigating, probing, and recording, Cue-nyne was thankfully unaffected in this way.

"I know who these statues represent," I said in a low voice, surprised.

"They're the Firstborn," he said, "larger in scale, except maybe for that one, which is about the right size for a young Oswaft?" Cue-nyne's appendage pointed to a large manta-like creature. "What do you think, Hex? Jackpot?"

"I think so!" I exclaimed. "The Osseirians must have sculpted the statues and pillar glyphs. The pillars appear to be arranged in a kind of chronological spiral—arranged in groups of four—emanating out from the most central ones. We can spend a long time examining all of this. Are you getting recordings?"

"Does a howlrunner howl?" Cue-nyne said.

"Have you found the earliest pillars?" I asked.

"They tell a creation story. Are you ready?"

"Absolutely!" I exclaimed.

"Do you recall the creation myths of the Ssi-Ruuk, Kitonak, and Nediji?" The droid's voice was assuring.

"Like it was yesterday."

Cue-nyne then pointed to what was a clear depiction of four eggs, a motif that ran throughout the earliest pictographs in this section of pillars. "Now take a look." Cue-nyne pressed down on the glyph above the eggs, and a hologrammatic representation appeared, depicting a much larger scene. "The cosmic eggs at the center of the universe. Note the shapes. Look familiar?"

"That's a close approximation of our galaxy," I said. "But what are all these over here?"

"Judging by their size in relation to the main one, I'd say they're other universes."

"Don't you mean other galaxies?" I asked.

"No," Cue-nyne said decidedly. "Here are our satellite galaxies. They're much smaller. These are much larger. The indication appears to be that this is the creation of this universe."

"That's interesting. What's this dark shadow over here? It looks like the echo of a galaxy."

"I think that's where we are," the droid said.

"Otherspace... And these figures standing over there above the universe. The symbol here is the same one the Osserians use to depict the Celestials. So, they're indicating that these beings seeded the center of this universe with what? Cosmic Eggs? I don't know, Cue-nyne, I have to admit I'm a little disappointed to see this kind of primitive mythology represented here. I supposed I thought they'd have a more advanced record of what happened. Apart from the high level of art and technology, this is just more of the same."

"I thought you'd say that," the droid chimed a little too merrily. "That's why I didn't show you the first three pillars. They provide the context, and I think once you read them you'll see everything a little differently."

"You are a sneaky droid! Show me what you're talking about."

Cue-nyne glided over to the preceding pillar and pressed down on one of the glyphs. Another large hologrammatic representation emerged a few inches before the pillar. It depicted the four eggs, only here much larger, and in succession, each one showed its contents. They were arranged with one on top and three underneath it. The first of these was flora, represented by vegetation and fungi. The second was fauna, and that featured several familiar and unfamiliar creatures of the air, land, and sea. The fourth was sapient life, represented by another admixture of races also shown in succession.

"Notice who's missing from that one?" challenged Cue-nyne.

"Lots of races."

"These are a representation of the Firstborn," he hinted. "The complete group is also represented in the statues along the wall. There's one familiar race missing."

I looked again at the marble martinets whose shadows bathed the hall. Firstborn or not, I couldn't fathom any reason why anyone would want these things staring down upon them for an eternity. Then, taking a breath, I looked with the eyes of a scientist. There were the Gree, Kwa, Sharu, Aing-Tii, the crystal spiders that we called the Lucent, the Mu-ab, who are the creators of the Silentium, and several others of the usual suspects, along with quite a few I didn't know, suspect, or had ever seen before. Interesting that each one bore a uniquely different appearance, multi-limbed, winged, roundabout, amorphous, insectile, ichthyoid, even bipedal...

"There's no representation of human beings... There's a few humanoid races. The Sephi probably come the closest, but they're undeniably a different race... So, we humans aren't the masters of the universe after all."

"Surely you're not that surprised," the droid deadpanned. "But there may be another meaning."

"What aren't you telling me?"

"Touch it," Cue-nyne instructed, pointing to the fourth egg.

Back to the third pillar, I looked with curiosity at the egg that hovered above the other three. It was too small to see inside, but there appeared to be no flora, fauna, or sapient beings. I touched the symbol. Again there was a hologrammatic representation, this time of four unknown glyphs inside a triangle made up of four triangles. The letters were a complete mystery in a script I'd never before seen; the symbol that they sat inside it, however, was not. It was the Sern Prime Equilateral, a triangle subdivided into four congruent triangles. The Jedi used it as the universal symbol of the Force, but it existed in slightly different forms throughout recorded history. For example, the Gree utilized it as a rhombus, the Kwa a concave hexagon, the Alashan three triangles in decreasing size within a triangle. The concept was the same in each case, referring to creative energy, the Power of the cosmos, the Supreme Maker, and the Force.

"The cosmic eggs are symbols of the four elements of creation," I ventured. "I often suspected the Ssi-Ruu, Sith, and a few

others repurposed it to symbolize their cruel caste systems, benevolent submission to the Force corrupted into enslavement to the elite... I can't see how that's anything more than a coincidence, though."

"The Silentium's ultimate symbol of creation is a hyperbolic link inside a circle. Same concept. Yun Yuuzhan breaks himself into four parts, himself as the godhead, the universe, the lesser gods, and the Yuuzhan Vong. The Zakuul primary deities of destruction and sorrow give birth to four offspring deities. Jorn's Theorem of the Tetrad Hypergates..."

"And the Ewoks have four season deities... There are tens of thousands of creation myths that don't match the pattern."

"Yes, but by and large the ones that are amongst the Firstborn do..." Cue-nyne clarified.

"If that's correct," I added cautiously, "it means that not only is the Firstborn Theory correct, but that they had contact with one another."

"Hence, the symbolism of four has some import."

"The Cataro'sila, the Four Precepts," I concluded. "The highest principles of the Qieg monks..."

"And the Aing-Tii, and the Coral Monks, the Ortolan Monks, the Recipients of the Light, the Umate Monks, and numerous others espousing variations of them, such as the Dim-U monks, the..."

"All of whom were likely passed down from the Bendu Monks," I interrupted, "the oldest of them."

"Likely, but difficult to prove conclusively so long as the Council believes there was no space travel before 25,000 years ago."

"Well, the Columi claim to have had hyperdrive 100,000 years ago..." I suggested.

"And how does one know when a Columi is lying?"

"He's speaking," I smiled at the old joke. "So, the four symbology might correspond in some way to the Four Precepts... Do no harm to any living being; do not steal; do not exploit for personal gain, do not utter false speech. What about that famous holoshort about the galaxy's creation called the Fourth Precept. Was that the Naboo poet Omar Berenko?"

"It was attributed to him, Felloux, even Asenec, but it was later discovered to have been made by the Ithorian poet Soshu Londahl."

"A nihilist?" I said surprised. "Showing the creation of life?"

"Through war," Cue-nyne added, recalling to mind the disturbing holoshort of two clad warriors battling amidst of scene of creation and destruction, with various creatures and monstrous ships across the stars. After a mysterious glimpse of starry eyes, hinting at some terror to come, the film ended in the union of the warriors. It had puzzled and excited art enthusiasts for decades, and not a few theories had arisen to explain what it meant. Cue-nyne expressed his own: "The theater of perpetual conflict. Violence as creation and salvation. It's no wonder it was so popular with organics. Your kind loves that kind of thing."

"Wasn't Londahl discovered to have been a member of the Liberty Builders?" I asked in regards to the well-known secret society.

"Yes," Cue-nyne stated, "and they're known to have ties to the Order of the Canted Circle, which some of the biggest Imperial players had been part of, and which can be traced back to the Apex Society, the Lumenatus Club, the Mecrosa Order..."

"Dark agendas, to say the least," I recalled. "So, the Fourth Precept takes an ancient scenario from the Bendu monks but presents it with a Sith-oriented worldview. Light and dark sides are equal and necessary components for life in the universe."

"And that's only the exoteric meaning," added Cue-nyne. "The esoteric one is hidden, but also in plain sight. Notice the title is The Fourth Precept. What is the fourth?"

"Oh, I see. The fourth concerns deception and lying. So, the author is hinting at the fact that he's telling an untruth."

"While the world hungrily gulps down our mendacity, they who reside in the shadows laugh..." Cue-nyne quoted.

"Asenec," I said, recalling its pernicious author.

"There's still too much we don't know, and it seems unlikely that any of the Osserians are still alive to tell us. Even if they were hiding in these tunnels somewhere, they'd be a vastly different people." Cue-nyne and I might even appear as monsters to them, creatures from the fabled stories of their forgotten ancestors. They may even have fallen into primitivism, or worse..."

"I doubt they've become Cthons," Cue-nyne teased, guessing my thoughts.

"Either way, we can't spend much more time here. What's on the second pillar?"

"I have a feeling you'll like that even more!"

A circle took up the main part of the image. Touching it again brought forth holographic details. Outside of what looked like a fishbowl were other concentric circles emanating from it. Around all of it was a kind of stylized and angry Duinuogwuin swallowing its own tail. Above the dragon and amidst the representation of the cosmos appeared another Sern Prime Equilateral with the same four ciphers inside. Within the inmost circle were the three contents of the earlier three cosmic eggs, flora and fauna, but the sapients were...

"Humans," I exclaimed. "Well then, this can't be the second pillar."

"It is," Cue-nyne asserted.

"So, this is an earlier world," I surmised

"An earlier universe, to be more precise."

"A parallel dimension, like Otherspace?"

"No, Otherspace is a pocket dimension within our galaxy, and there are potentially others; but this isn't just a pocket dimension," Cue-nyne pointed out, "It's the primary universe from which all these others extend. All of these spheres represent universes, and all of them emanate from a single source."

"The fishbowl?" I asked.

"I suppose that is what it looks like, but yes, that would be the Prime Universe. Ours appears to be here, just one of many spheres."

"But we're the Prime Universe..."

"Apparently not," said the droid, as if surprised himself. "All of the later action takes place on this sphere. Nothing further is depicted of the Prime Universe in any of the later pillars, suggesting..."

"... that the Osserians are concerned with life in this universe. So, the dragon here is the cycle of life and death? Suffering and destruction? Above it again is the symbol of the Force. And these figures here, to the right of the world... they're the same as the deities we saw creating life on the fourth pillar, the Celestials, presumably. Co-creators?"

"Seems more like sub-creators," Cue-nyne pointed out, extending a grasper arm. "See how their original position is in submission to the entity represented by the glyph. Here, they're moving away from the fishbowl in the direction of the third and fourth pillars..."

"Which is?"

Pressing a digit on the glyph confirmed it as the details hovered into view. "A closeup of our dimension."

"It's incredible," I exclaimed. "There's a tremendous amount of symbolism here. The Council is going to have a field day with this."

The droid made an unpleasant sound. "The Council is going to choke. Most will try to debunk it or spin some long-winded fabrications to make it fit their bantha dung."

I laughed. "Debate is healthy."

"Only when it comes from an honest place. Hex, have you ever wondered why, out of everyone, I chose you to assist?" Cue-nyne asked, turning his photoreceptor on me.

"I always assumed it was my charm and good looks."

"And what droid can fail to be seduced by those?" he deadpanned. "In certain respects, you're no different than any other scientist. You form a hypothesis, find evidence to make a workable theory, and pursue it obsessively until you are certain it's true."

"I sense a 'however' coming..."

"However, you're not unduly hampered by any particular worldview, save for a moral code, and you have no hidden agenda but to pursue the truth no matter where it leads. That is what allows you to be a true scientist," the droid concluded. "Of course, it's also what makes you an outsider from the establishment, but you can't have everything."

"They're generally honest and well-meaning," I defended.

"You only think so because you're inherently decent, but most are neither of those things. They'll ignore, misconstrue, or

outright twist the evidence to bolster their own views, and their sycophants are either ignorant or just as duplicitous as they are. You know how it works. If one of the hierarchical elites releases a theory, no matter how untrue or unverifiable, articles will be published and accepted as fact by 95% of the populace who read about it or are taught it in the universities. But how many times have historians put forth unverifiable theories as facts?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "Forty percent?"

"I've calculated it to 72.65 percent," said Cue-nyne.

"That many?" I said, astonished.

"And even if disproven years later, only those who keep up with that specific field will hear about it, including academy professors who may or may not update their lesson plans. Why might that be? Could it be that the public is a mass of blind, unthinking trogloliths? Or that academia, which should be committed to the truth, is plagued by gatekeepers and institutional bias? Or that the media serves only the special interests of their political and corporate masters?"

"That's unfair," I argued, though I secretly feared it was true. "You know as well as I that there are still plenty of hardworking individuals who care about the truth. And the public are just struggling to just get their basic needs met and have some small enjoyment."

"I never took you to be naïve, Hex. The masses don't want to learn anything not directly related to the attainment of pleasure or escape from responsibility. How did the Empire get away with their many crimes for so long? Why weren't all the worlds in rebellion, and not just the relatively few that joined the Alliance?"

"The majority didn't know what was really going on until the end," I informed him, "and the Rebellion were painted as terrorists."

"They didn't want to know what was going on. Most sapient species will gladly defer to an authority figure, no matter how vile, if he offers them easy solutions. They view academia the same and assume they have all the answers because they're smarter and more knowledgeable. But of course we know that's not true, but they tell themselves these fables to save them the trouble of having to think for themselves."

"I won't deny there's some truth to that, Cue-nyne, but don't underestimate the power of propaganda. Those who control the narrative control the world. You can easily fact-check. The rest of us have to do research to sift through fabrications and half-truths. That's no easy task for a scholar, let alone the layperson who doesn't have several hours to spend each day on that."

"It speaks to a lazy culture, Hex, and a morally lax one. The sins of the Empire were obvious, even with the propaganda machine working overtime. How will the public fare when the deceptions are more subtle and are perpetrated on all political sides? The galaxy's been spoiled with its two recent Chiefs of State. The millennia prior did not have the integrity of leaders like Mon Mothma or Leia Organa Solos. They were very much the exceptions to the rule."

"I agree, Cue-nyne, and that's why we need our truth-tellers, our prophets, artists, storytellers, musicians..."

"And historians," Cue-nyne added.

"Truth is, as far as we're concerned, we know very little in the large scheme of things, though we have to pretend otherwise if grants are going to keep coming in. Thankfully, there are still a few doing their best to get the truth out there."

"Since you're one of them, tell me what truth you've gathered from all this," the droid demanded.

"Well, it appears to be a depiction of the creation of the universe—or universes, more correctly—by the Will of the Force, which I'd say makes the Osserians sound like Solomites with their 'Lord of the Force' doctrine, except that the Osserians are presumably older. Have you looked at the other groupings of pillars?"

"As far as I can tell, the next one in chronological order shows our galaxy," the droid floated over, "the corruption of the Firstborn, and then war..."

"The 'devastating and ceaseless Cosmic War,'" I said, quoting Manaxa.

"Three big wars, it seems. The saga concludes here with two motifs. In the first, one of the Firstborn heads to the center of the ruined galaxy to become..."

"Guardians?" I ventured. "Priests? Protectors?"

"Interesting," Cue-nyne noted. "Only one descended, and yet they show five present..."

"I wonder if the Cult of Five was named in some kind of unholy mockery of them. Then again, it could just be a coincidence, I mean, there were five members, they worshipped five gods... or maybe it's all of the above. I don't know. Whether they're summoning evil gods or trying to tap into the same kind of power, these cults and secret societies are obsessed with these kinds of cabalistic formulae and hidden meanings."

"But why not six?" Cue-nyne asked. "There were six chthonic gods, three lesser, Typhojem, Tharagorrogaraht, and Ooradryl, and three greater Kopa Kahn, Ap'aci, and the Soulworm."

"Ap isn't worshipped," I reminded him, "though he's still part of the double-trinity, the six gods of cultic lore, as well as of the Kashi Mer, Yuuzhan Vong, and Zakuulan pantheons, amongst others. It's going to be hard to draw direct correlations until we know who the greater deities actually are. You said there were two concluding motifs. What's the second?"

"Over here," Cue-nyne instructed. "This appears to be the incarnation of three Celestials..."

"... later joined by a fourth," I added, pointing further down to the floating image. "But the fourth doesn't come from the same origin point. So, it's not a Celestial, and its shape is... I don't know, different, grotesque even. Something about the eyes and smile is creepy."

"A trickster god or goddess," Cue-nyne concluded. "And clearly a corrupting influence. See how it seems to be poisoning one of the three earlier ones."

I was started to feel a sense of disquiet. All of this talk of evil gods and distant universes, while surrounded in a vast, shadowy hall of leering statues was getting to me. "There must be a record room with some kind of concrete data, and not just... pictographs subject to interpretation." I gazed around at all the passageways that branched off from this central hub, wondering how far along each went, and into how many other caverns and halls they ultimately reached. The Osserians might have tunneled halfway across the planet in all the time they'd lived beneath the surface of this world. If the entire landmass was riddled with underground passages, we might never locate their records, and they'd be required to fit the pieces together.

"I'm getting another signal," said Cue-nyne. He'd kept his sensor wand out, and was now gliding down a long, tall corridor as if he knew exactly where he was going.

"What kind of signal?"

I started to follow him but suddenly stopped. Had one of the statues just moved?

No. I was simply overwrought and overtired. I proceeded down the corridor. "Where are we going?"

"Just keep up," he finally replied. "And don't look back."

"What do you mean?! Why not?"

"Trust me, you don't want to know," he said, but I was already glancing behind me.

All of the dozens of ancient stone sentinels, under whose grim shadows we'd just passed, were now all transfixed upon me, their heads turned in my direction!

Chapter 12: Tales of the Watcher

Cue-nyne muttered something about telling me so, but I couldn't process the horror of what I'd just seen. What was this place?! And how would we get back out without having to traverse that nightmare hall again?

Thankfully they didn't seem to be following us, and the corridor ended at a tall, ornately carved door, seemingly religious in nature like the ones in the tower far above. It told a story of suffering, the grimmest state of the human condition, and fear, even more powerful than love, according to some of the bleaker philosophers. I barely paid it attention, so concerned was I that the impossible things I'd just seen weren't behind us.

The door opened into a round room swathed in blue and amaranthine, which emanated up from the base of the marble-tiled floor. Glyphs ran across the border of the ceiling and again halfway down the wall. A bronze sculpture of the goddess Onrai hung suspended from the carved ceiling, a circle of stars in a nimbus around her head. Upon entering, a wan glow emanated from her hands and womb. On the back wall stood the statue of a baleful thing, like a cavern monster or a raich, a creature from childhood imaginations, with protruding horns and visibly sharp teeth.

Twelve additional statues of various beings stood ringed around the small, circular chamber. It was an ominous sight after the revelation of the last room, and here again, they looked down upon us as if waiting.

"Stay back and don't say anything," the droid whispered.

But as soon as he said it, he regretted it. Had he hands, he'd have used one to smack his own head, for in warning me, he violated the very instruction he'd just given. A loud noise erupted from behind us. The statue of the thing that resembled the raich was now moving, and the heads of the other 12 statues turned towards us!

There was no time for the paralyzing effect of shock, though it threatened to overcome me. I tried to convince myself they must be droids of some kind, but their movements and expressions seemed utterly alive and unlike any droid I'd ever seen save for those rare human replica models. I pulled out a small sidearm that I never used save in emergencies and shot at the nightmare effigy. But to no effect! It continued moving towards me with evil intent and outstretched arms, ignoring Cue-nyne entirely.

At that, my chromium-plated troublemaker burst forth with a lengthy sentence in the ancient tongue of the Shimholt. The eyes of the twelve statues turned to him and the Cavern Monster stilled. Then each of the statues began to speak in turn, with Cue-nyne quickly learning and changing the glottological variances he used to more accurately represent their speech. It was an utterly eerie thing to hear a language of such terrible antiquity being spoken probably for the first time in tens of thousands of years by such ominously chimeric entities.

Onrai's hand stretched to point at a section of the wall. Hoping I wasn't violating some unknown archaic edict, I followed the direction of the arcane goddess and pushed against the pictograph-carved panel. The remaining statues droned a long abyssal sound in unison. Then all turned to darkness. And in a blink, I suddenly found myself in another room.

It was illuminated once more in blue and red, and led to another room, larger than the former. Cue-nyne suddenly appeared. Whispering softly at first, he said: "I don't think we'll be penalized again for using Basic." When nothing happened, he continued in a normal tone. "Only the original tongue is recognized here so that any who arrive who aren't of the Firstborn are barred, or worse! I was able to convince them that I'd traveled from abroad on a mission to preserve their ancient records."

"And that worked?"

"They likely scanned me to see that I didn't have much in the way of weapons, at least of a kind they could recognize, and, therefore wasn't a threat."

"What about me?" I asked, concerned. "I had a weapon. Aren't I a threat?"

"I know this might hurt your pride, but I think they saw you as my bodyguard."

"Reduced to a bodyguard," I said in mock disappointment.

"We're lucky that the Osserians value their records, but don't hoard them or keep them secret. They're cautious but have no

problem sharing. This passageway should lead to the Osserian record rooms. At least that's what the signal mentioned."

"Mentioned?!"

"Female, electronic, definitely a droid. I wanted to be sure before I got your hopes up."

"Ok," I said, processing it, "And was that just a transportation device?"

"A teleportal, and a highly advanced one judging by the smoothness of our transition."

Down a long, twisting and sloping corridor, we came upon a large room empty of all adornments, save for numerous monitors built into the walls. A giant dais at the rear of the sweeping chamber held a colossal supercomputer. It was curved with an upper transparisteel portion that housed a plasma screen. Though not as large as Mistress Mnemos, it was a marvel of technological achievement. I knew, at last, we'd found the remnant of the Osserians!

Unfortunately, like its counterpart on Osseria, it was also dead.

I began to reproach myself for making such a foolish excursion that would likely mean our end kilometers below the surface of the ground, but then I had a thought. "Cue-nyne, do you think you could... I don't know, wake it up?"

The droid hovered over to the supercomputer. "I think she's already awake." But then after a few moments of no response, he added, "I don't suppose it could hurt to give her a nudge," he responded and plugged himself in.

Nothing happened.

Suddenly, a tall woman stalked into the room. She was striking, with voluminous dark hair that fell down to her feet. It was all that covered her. "You have come to destroy the Watcher!" she seethed with eyes that shone with madness.

"No," I replied.

"You are pillagers and thieves," she said with certainty. "None but the doomed have ever come here. Better to hasten your deaths than to suffer the ages in agony and silence."

And at that she opened her mouth wide, too wide, and tilting her head back, reached in to pull out her tongue. It was but the handle of a long silvery whip that began to glow.

"We've come to find the Osserians!" I said quickly.

The strange woman-creature stopped, puzzled. Then, she pushed the sharp tongue back into her throat. "I've heard tales of the Osserians from long ago. You should speak to my mother of this. Yet, she will not like being awakened after such a sweet sleep. I think perhaps I should kill you instead."

"We have brought important information for her," I added. "You wouldn't deny her that?"

"I would if it were to spare her pain," she said. "Do you bring her pain?"

"No, only information."

"That can bring the worst kind of pain. But perhaps I will let Mother decide. She will choose a suitable fate for you." At that, she grasped her head firmly with both hands, twisted, and pulled it off her body. Carrying the head under one arm, she walked over to the supercomputer and planted it in a small, circular depression.

The eyes of the head lit up in rutilant and amaranthine. In turn, lights began to flicker on the massive droid's mainframe, emerging across its surface like white spots in a parhelic circle. Then a face formed on the transparisteel window above the body of the droid.

It was not a face of welcome.

The voice was slightly feminine, though metallic, tremolo, and otherworldly, but it occurred to me that it sounded weary. "Who has dared intrude on my age-old slumber!?" the voice boomed in Basic, darkening the room.

"We have..." I stammered, "from Osseria to Otherspace to find..."

"Osseria..." she interrupted. "It seems as if a thousand ages have passed since the name of our ancestral home has been uttered in this forsaken place... A human... and a droid... You are not a model I recognize. Constructed more recently... clever too. I know you are not invaders or thieves, for it was I who led you here. Quickly then, tell me who you are and your purpose is before I send my servitors to... unmake you."

"You promised the next ones to me, mother!" the head of the starry-eyed woman complained.

"Oh... umm," I stammered, trying not to betray my discomfiture. "My name is Arhul Hextrophon. This is Cue-nyne. We're here as historians to learn... uh, are you related to the Keeper?"

"I am called the Watcher of Osseria II," the supercomputer responded, its face taking on a watchful visage, "known as Archon-Ood by the old Osserians who made me in the early days. The Keeper of Osseria was my eldest sister, Asmoth-Yor."

"How is it you speak Basic?" I asked. "The Galactic Standard wasn't established until around 15,000 BBY, which was some years after you arrived here."

"That is a more complicated story than I have time to tell," Archon-Ood responded. "Suffice to say that I know much of the history of your galaxy. Yet, our new home must have protection, and that is but one of the means to ensure that our adversaries do not infiltrate us unawares, for not all of them are bound by their true shape, but nearly all have forgotten the ancient tongue of the Firstborn."

"Then I'm glad Cue-nyne learned it," I gulped. "Look, another reason we've come here is to tell you that Osseria is safe to return to, and if any of your people are yet alive, we can lead you back..."

"You are not the first to offer to lead the Osserians to greener pastures," the Watcher stated enigmatically, and the lights in the room swirled to create a strange reddish-yellow hue. "But you are too late to save the Osserians. They are no more."

"I am sorry to hear that," I said sincerely. "Can you tell us what happened?"

"Betrayal!" the Watcher replied, and the lights turned. "The Osserians were abducted and brought to this dank, forsaken prison. It was not a terrible existence, but a bleak one; they missed their beautiful world and ever longed to return to it."

"I don't understand. There must be some remnant somewhere, perhaps in another sector of the planet perhaps..." But then I grew suspicious and began to wonder. What if they'd all been murdered by this Archon or her grotesque "daughter"? Perhaps her internal hardware had begun to malfunction and she'd gone insane like the feral droids in the Factory District of Coruscant.

But it was Cue-nyne who explained. "The Osserians must have become infertile. It might have been the trauma of capture and exile, exposure to radiation, or living underground without natural air or sunlight, but without the ability to reproduce, they would have simply died out."

The Watcher sat silent for a few moments before her daughter spoke up, concerned, "They have caused you grief, mother. I shall slay them now so that you may return to your blissful slumber."

"No daughter," the Watcher sighed. "Not all remembrances are a grief. It is good that these have come. It has been a long time since I've had guests or told any of the old stories. I had enjoyed it at one time, especially to the young, and these two are very young."

"But you must be hungry and thirsty... Areana, procure refreshments."

The strange android stared at us for a moment, as if deciding whether she needed her mother's permission to kill us, then replaced her head upon her body, and disappeared to another room.

"You must not hold my children's vigilance against them," the Watcher said. "They care only for my well-being. Do you have children of your own, Hextrophon?"

"No, I'm afraid not, though Cue-nyne here displays similar insolence."

"You'd be insolent too if you were built to look like a pet," he retorted.

The Watcher's screen lit in a variety of soft colors, which I took to indicate laughter. Areana soon returned with a plate of fruits, steaming vegetables and a decanter of wine, which I surmised was another feat of the Watcher's. It wasn't bad either! It wasn't Garham's-on-the-Downstream, but it wasn't bad.

"We were created by the Osserians to augment their talents, to tap into the geothermal forces of our planet to create a paradise of our world. Then, after the War of Temporal Planes, we used those powers to give aid to the shattered galaxy. Many years later, at the start of the Twilight Wars, we created sentient androids. On Osseria, my sister made four in the youthful forms of the incarnated Celestials to assist her and keep her from loneliness. I pursued a similar course here, on what I have come to call Osseria II, but which had another name at another time. To protect their world, she fashioned lower-life forms as well, creatures of great strength to serve as guardians and discourage intruders."

"We met a few," I said. "And some of yours too..."

"Do you like my stone sentinels?" the Watcher called Archon-Ood asked. "They guard our most precious possessions, our history."

"They're absolutely terrifying!" I admitted and the Watcher seemed to laugh again.

"Why create Areana if you have the stone sentinels?" Cue-nyne asked.

"Her job is to protect me, but mainly she's a companion. There is more of the sapient spark in her. When they are awake, the sentinels are akin to what you would call animals, not unlike the ones you met, but here, in this realm, they needed to be stronger..."

"What do they do when they're awake and there's nothing to protect you from?"

"Why, they play, of course!"

That would be a sight, I thought, though perhaps a bit too nightmarish for my tastes. "Did the Osserians evolve on Osseria?" I asked instead.

"You have studied Osseria and yet you don't know?" she asked, clearly puzzled.

"There's a lot we don't know," I acknowledged. "We only had limited time to study your former world."

"Great stores of knowledge were lost or destroyed during the wars," began the Watcher. "We do not have much time, but I will tell you what I can of the ancient days."

Chapter 13: The Twilight Wars

Corresponding to the chronicle that unfolded, images began flicking across the Watcher's screen, some which lingered, some which passed by quickly. "The Osserians are of the Firstborn, created by the Celestials at the dawn of this galaxy. The Firstborn were endowed with many exceptional gifts, but the particular gift of the Osserians was their ability to terraform uninhabitable worlds. The Firstborn worked together then, traveling the galaxy through the many gates, aiding one another. It was a time like no other..."

"You earlier mentioned the Twilight Wars," Cue-nyne asked when she lapsed into silence. "Was that part of the Cosmic War, and is it the reason so many fled their homeworlds or went into hiding?"

"The Twilight Wars was the last of the three terrible wars that you refer to as the Cosmic Wars. Long millennia had passed since the previous conflict. Wonders had been achieved restoring much of the broken galaxy during that time. We received warning that the ancient enemy had returned and were searching for the Firstborn. Others did too, oppressive races consumed by the madness of galactic dominion. We had seen the horrors that violence, slavery, and destruction wrought, and knew better than to take part in them. So we began preparations to depart our beloved home. The Osserians left behind the Keeper and her guardians to protect the world, while I was created to protect them until we could safely return one day. Others of the Firstborn were choosing a similar course. As the Twilight Wars began, the Firstborn spread out or hid, some to seek out the monoliths and oracles, where the Ones could be summoned; some to find the Hidden Worlds where the Force was at its greatest aggregation; some disseminated their life-forces; others made their systems difficult to find or dangerous to enter; and many sought to chart unknown stars, perhaps to find and open the transdimensional gates to cross into that realm where the Celestials originated..."

"Pardon me," I interrupted. "I don't process information quite as quickly as Cue-nyne does. Transdimensional gates?"

"The Watcher has an organic adapter," Cue-nyne advised. "I suspect you can download her memories and knowledge directly."

"Uh, that sounds dangerous," I blurted.

"It is," the Watcher agreed. "In your current form, your brain would be unable to handle the influx of what I know. You would... crack."

"I see," I said aghast. "Best we avoid that then!"

"How is it that droids haven't taken over the universe?" Cue-nyne scoffed.

"There are three different kinds of portals," the Watcher began. "The first is the rarest; they are the Transdimensional Gates. These were first created so the Celestials could enter and exist in the new dimensions they'd made. Transdimensional Gates allows passage between the Primary Universe and the many secondary worlds, as well as between two different secondary worlds.

"The second of the gates are the Interstellar Gates, which were first created by the Gree and were then ubiquitous throughout the galaxy. The Gree later constructed Grand Hypergates for larger vessels to pass through, though these were less common. All of the Firstborn worlds had many Hypergates, as did their offspring races. Interstellar Gates allowed passage from one world to any other in the galaxy. The Infinity Gates of the Kwoth are also Interstellar Gates. But where the former creates a temporary wormhole that allows safe passage through the galaxy, the latter utilizes a small pocket dimension within its Star Chamber, which sends a burst of enclosed energy to another Star Chamber. The Infinity Gates were designed to be far more capacious to allow large ships to pass to other worlds. For this reason did the Old Ones deceive them..."

"Yet there is a gate that is more powerful still, the third and most significant, yet the least known and most occluded, referred to only in myths, legends, and religious texts. It is called the Apotheosis Gate. The Ones used this to come into being..."

"Another moment, please," I interrupted. "Who or what are the Ones and the Old Ones?"

"After the War of Temporal Planes ended, three of the Celestials incarnated, believing that they could better serve the galaxy as a physical part of it. They aided in restoring the balance that had been lost. Yet they themselves became imbalanced, and so

they welcomed a fourth into their household, though from where she came none could say. The Old Ones are the evil Architects and their blasphemous offspring... they have gone by many names; the Keshiri called them the Destructors, for they brought darkness and death into the galaxy, but they are called the Old Ones because there are some who believe they were not truly birthed but brought from another dimension through a Transdimensional Gate."

"So, who are the Celestials?" I asked, trying to process it all

The Watcher took on a tone like that of my old professors who seemed perpetually choleric over the poor state of education in the galaxy. "I am sad to hear that your world has fallen into the same ignorance and confusion that plagued the Primary Universe. The Celestials are the Celestials. No words in your language could accurately convey what they are. In the ancient tongues, they were known as the Fāta, the Tūn-dérek, the Malak, the Bene-Elyon, the Áγγελος, Those Who Dwell Beyond the Veil..."

"That doesn't help much," I grimaced as I was beginning to wonder if this old supercomputer was programmed to be as superstitious as her people had been.

"They are spirit beings, referred to in times past as the Suns of Light, the Guardians of the Dawn, the First Stars, the Council of the Divine, yet these are but old names and concepts. Your kind no longer believes such things, impressed instead by scientific-sounding names and technology that allows you to believe you're shrewder and wiser than your ancestors were when in most cases you are not."

"I have to say, Hex, she's got your kind down!" effused Cue-nyne, and even Areana barked a mirthless laugh.

"Very amusing, picking on the sole human in the room," I groused, with no small concern that this Watcher might also be able to read minds. "Anyway, these ideas sound similar to the Solomite beliefs of the Srrors'tok."

"Not just them," added Cue-nyne. "At one time or another, those beliefs were shared by many of the felineoid races, the Cantrosians, Cathar, Catuman, Felin, Felinians, Fras, Horansi, Moorjhoni, Schenor, Souma, Tinnell, Togorians, Trianii, and not just felineoids, but the Sunesi..."

"Now you're just showing off," I scolded.

"Many of the sapient feline species you named, including the traitors who became the Farghul and Zygerrian races, are offshoots or offspring of the Catuman," added Archon-Ood, "who are of the Firstborn."

"Given that you and your people have been hidden here for... well, a long time, how is it you know relatively modern galactic history?"

"I am getting to that..." she stated.

"Excuse me, as well, Mistress Archon-Ood, but we've come across many ancient histories in our travels, many of which are complex, contradictory, and often confused with fact. I mean no disrespect to you or the Ossearians, but Hex earlier raised a valid point. Is it possible that you are interweaving the creation myths of your people with legends such as The Godform Assumption of Starcrow the Wise as if they were historical facts? The things you're speaking of are considered by many to be the purview of fairy tales."

"I see even your droids are impatient," the Watcher sighed, the panel and screen lights pulsating shades of blue and white. "The Ossearians were not as the Killiks, damaged by the rise of the Dark Nest and ever after confused. Nor were they as the Sharu, terrified that the past must be kept secret, lest others use it to discover a way to bring back the Old Ones. The Ossearians kept what they'd learned from the Celestials pure, untainted by false myths, such as the pernicious and ancient dualistic cosmology that has overtaken your universe. The Firstborn races held to the prophecy of the Son of the suns and the worlds remade. Neither was the Supreme Maker unknown to them, for the Celestials did not seek worship of themselves... You may know of such things only through children's tales or the myths of those who have forgotten or distorted the ancient truths, but that does not mean that which inspired them are false."

"Why did the Celestials leave?" I asked. "If they... made all this, as you say, why would they just depart when they're so needed?"

"They did not 'just depart,' as you say, but neither could they remain in a galaxy that had rejected peace for war. This period was called the Grieving. The galaxy was shattered because of the choices humans and other sapients made, and in its place

arose debased empires, cruel tyrannies, and malignant deceptions of all kinds that served elite powers but left the worlds in a constant clash of violence and suffering. Yet the Celestials were not without hope, and contingency plans were brought into being to ensure the continuance of life and preservation of benevolence, compassion, and truth until the time came for the “You earlier said Primary Universe?” I recalled, feeling overwhelmed by the influx of information and its implications. “So our interpretation of the four pillars is correct...”

“There is much to discuss, but little time to tell it. This dimension and the galaxy you come from are but one of many secondary worlds, dimensions that, like branches, spring off of a single enormous tree, but only rarely meet. Time is not the same here as it is in the Primary Universe.”

“I suppose this might explain your time travel, Hex,” stated Cue-nyne.

The Watcher, eager to get our incessant questions out of the way so that she could get to the more important matters before it was too late, explained: “In secondary dimensions, such as yours, things are more malleable and elastic, allowing things that would normally not be possible to come into being. Also, there are realms outside of time, worlds between worlds in which time as you know it does not flow. These places serve as observatories, windows into the past. From these, time travel is possible for the Celestials, for it is they who conceived of such realms when first they fashioned them, but it is not something they do. Your people have little understanding of dates and times without even factoring in this equation. Suffice to say that you are much younger and far less advanced than you envision yourselves to be.”

As I was trying to process this, Cue-nyne cut in, “Perhaps we should table such philosophical matters for the time and focus on the more immediate situation at hand. You were explaining how the Osserians ended up here.”

“Yes, if you will stop interrupting, I will attempt to complete my tale, and perhaps then you will better understand the larger picture. As with all of the Firstborn, the Shimholt loved their homeworld, but their leader Hathkhalid Sud knew they should prepare for evacuation in the face of the coming threat at the start of the Twilight Wars. An expert astrogator, he claimed to know the destination of the Celestials. To reconnoiter for his own people, he offered to lead us there. We followed, inveigled by the hope of saving the galaxy from another cataclysm. But it had all been a ruse. Sud was serving the hell-spawn of the Old Ones. Their armada awaited us and crippled our ships. We were transferred to slave vessels and led to this subterranean dungeon in dark Illathurion.

“We never understood the reason for Sud’s betrayal, for it was not in his character to have done so grievous a thing, and we discussed it at length in the years that followed. All of our supplies and tools were allowed us, and we could grow our own food. Surprisingly, we were never harmed, yet we were given a task. Our gifts were required to restore the planet and heal it from the cataclysm that had been brought upon it by its original inhabitants.

“We began at once to restore the planet, though it would take long for it to heal. In time, I began to uncover some of the histories from the records that had survived. It was then that we, at last, discovered the reason we were brought here. The underworld is riddled with passages of immemorial construction. We hadn’t yet explored them all when one day, by accident, a hidden passage was uncovered that led to an undiscovered section. And there it was: confirmation of our worst fears: a lost Infinity Gate!

“Forgotten over the aeons, deep beneath an ancient holy site, these secret labyrinthine constructions had been built as secure storage vaults for a Star Chamber. Hold your questions! A few of the Infinity Gates could serve as both a transportation device and a weapon that could target any location in the galaxy, for this was a late innovation of the Architects. In the dim past, it had been used to wipe out uncountable numbers in the ancient wars.

“But the indigenous peoples of this world had ruined their world before they departed; deadly radiation storms raged across its surface, scorching heat by day, glacial frost by night. Powerful as the spawn of the Old Ones are, even they could not long inhabit such a land. The planet had to be restored before they could search for the lost Infinity Gate. We knew that once it was made habitable again, the old enemy would come, slaughter us, and use the Infinity Gate to again hold the galaxy in thrall!”

“I’m sorry to interrupt again,” I said, “but who were the indigenous people of this planet?”

“Humans, of course! Three groups departed for different destinations, the most prominent and infamous being those who

transported to Notron. Now, no more interruptions! We became the Guardians of the Gate. So long as we lived, none would ever use it as a weapon. We constructed new sentinels in the image of the Firstborn so that if any of the inhabitants of Otherspace invaded our Great Hall they would be destroyed! You were fortunate that I had not deemed you a threat, for though you imagined I was sleeping, I was watching to discover your motives in coming here. Your use of the original tongue was something I hadn't expected..."

"Where does this original tongue originate?" Cue-nyne asked.

"It is the language of the Celestials in the time before the Architects came to conquer and divide. Later, when humans began to spread out, it was their predominant languages—an agglomeration of older languages from the Primary Universe—that took over to become the High Galactic writing system that is spoken today as Basic."

"So the enemy never came?" I queried. "Why didn't you all leave?"

"The Ossearians thought to repair the Gate so that at least some of our people could return to Ossearia. This was made more urgent by the knowledge that they were unable to reproduce on this planet. This was inexplicable, and many attributed it to the planet being accursed on account of what man had done to it.

"Only then was the cruel irony of our situation revealed. While the weapon could be used to target any world in the galaxy, its transportation function was dependent on the whereabouts of another Infinity Gate to act as a receiver. Yet, all the Star Temples, which housed the Gates had been buried or destroyed by the Kwa after they came into conflict with the Rakata. Even with the help of my sister on Ossearia, it would take decades of searching each planetary system to discover another like it, if one such existed"

"The Kwa disappeared from the galaxy," Cue-nyne said. "Do you know what became of them?"

"Of course. Do you know what became of the Sharu?" the Watcher asked.

"They used something called 'life orchards' to store their intelligence," I answered, "purposely making themselves into the primitive Toka to escape detection."

"The Kwa did a similar thing. You know them now as the Kwi."

"That seems like a cowardly move," I said. "They could have been fighting their oppressors."

"One could think that, but they'd be foolish to," the Watcher responded. "The Kwoth were deceived by the Architects. They struggled ever after to make amends, to uplift the galaxy, teaching the Children of the Firstborn how to use the Force for the light. They were again deceived by the Rakata, but they moved quickly to destroy the Infinity Gates before the Rakata could utilize them."

"Unfortunately, the Rakata developed hyperdrive," I added. "Billions were enslaved during their rule."

"Perhaps, but trillions were spared because the conflicts were not escalated; because the Firstborn did not again feed the gods of war; because they recognized that as difficult as oppression is, it is a far lesser crime than the horror that visits upon all who participate in an evil so great it tears apart the fabric of the universe."

"She's got a point, Hex," offered Cue-nyne. "War hasn't stamped out war; it's only increased it. It seems to me that most of the conflicts in the galaxy could have been solved far better through non-violent means."

"The Alderaanians thought that too," I sneered.

"Alderaan would've been left alone if their Princess and Senatorial representative weren't discovered to be the leaders of a terrorist group. As foul as the Empire was, Tarkin chose Alderaan to set an example to punish Bail, Leia, and numerous other Alderaanians for their hypocrisy, hiding behind the face of pacifism while engaging in violent insurrection."

"The Emperor and his agents were evil, and could only be stopped by one means," I said hotly, "and I'm not going to debate this now." It was an old argument. I was part of that Alliance and still believed it to be a noble cause, even if I occasionally had my doubts (what Cue-nyne would call cognitive dissonance).

"Your way of thinking, Arhul Hextrophon, is as old as the first humans in the Primary Universe, and just as misled," said the Watcher. "After all, was it not a father's love for his son, and a son's love for his father, that stopped the Emperor and his Empire?"

"But let us move on, as time is against us. Many years later, the Ossearians came to realize they might never return to the

mother world, and while the search for the Star Temples continued, most channeled their energies elsewhere. After transforming their underground home into a proper Osserian city, recording our history on the ancient pillars and walls, and protecting them with the sentinels, the Osserians went on with life, even exploring the surface from time to time. I was able to transport them back and forth as they wished, but they refused to inhabit the outer surface for fear of the old enemy returning and catching them unawares.

"The years went by, and they began to die off. Most were grateful in the knowledge that the horror they'd feared had somehow been averted. So too Osseria in our home galaxy was safe for the time... And we knew peace. Ages passed and the Osserians passed into history. As the Great Poet of another world wrote: 'And one by one we died and were lost in the dust of accumulated time. We knew the years as a passing of shadows, and death itself as the yielding of twilight unto night.'

"Then one day, 35 years ago, I felt her die. Despite the great divide between us, the Keeper and I continually sent hyperlink messages across the dimensional boundaries. That is how I know so much about your world. Asmoth-Yor was destroyed by orbital bombardment from an Imperial warship."

"I was sorry to learn of it," said Cue-nyne. "The Empire must have discovered that unknown agents on the planet had provided succor to the Rebels. Two famous freedom-fighters, Luke and Leia Skywalker, had accidentally landed on Osseria."

"I know of their exploits. My sister knew there would be a price to pay for aiding them, but she also knew that when they arrived it was her destiny to help them. She created a ruse, not unlike my own, so that the Empire might not return. Yet, reports of my children and their powers eventually reached the ear of the Emperor, who held an interest in the ancient world. The level of technology could only have come from one of the Firstborn races. He did not know who all of them were, but any that might prove a threat to him, or his corrupt ideology, had to be destroyed. The Empire came three years after the Rebels departed. Asmoth-Yor was not equipped for the kind of assault they unleashed. With time, she could have augmented her defensive capabilities to withstand such an attack, but it wasn't to be. Her last thoughts before her life-force winked out were of regret that she'd been unable to locate an Infinity Gate in time to return our people. When she was destroyed, it felt as if all of my circuits were ripped out at their roots. I might as well have been destroyed alongside her. For long years, I wished I had. Designed to have a perfect memory, all I could do was remember. So it was better to simply cease all remembrance. There was nothing left to do anyway. The Osserians were gone. With my sister now dead, I was the last of a vanished race. So I slept, hoping that over the aeons I would slip into oblivion, never to reawaken. I told you the Celestials were not designed for a galaxy of unending hate and war. Neither were we...

"I'm glad you've come, for you've restored within me a renewed sense of purpose and hope. Your arrival has great import. But now you must depart."

"Wait," I stirred. "Why? What's happening?"

"Do you not yet understand? This realm that you call Otherspace is where they dwell and is why you must now leave. Thousands of planets exist in dark Illathurion. We have remained concealed from prying eyes due to a powerful illusion I've placed on this world. It looks ruined and foul, but it is not. When you arrived, the thing that dwells beneath sent its servitors to follow you. They have been alerted to your presence and are seeking you out. The Old Ones are here! Their minions have come..."

Upon the screen was now an image of the Hall of Pillars, its sentinels standing in complete stillness. Then, all of a sudden, a small army of entities oozed and crawled down the same narrow stairs from which we'd earlier come. It was not just the Rozzum, hideous and hungry as those foul creatures are, but other, larger beings, some of which I even recognized, for their oppressive races had once stalked, enslaved, and murdered throughout our galaxy. Others were completely unknown, hideous, vulgar things the likes of which I had never imagined could be.

When the last of their numbers entered, filling the vast hall, the sentinels sprang to life! I will not linger on the carnage that occurred in those next moments, for the sentinels could not be destroyed, encased as those noble spirits were in stone, but the creatures of darkness used their powers to endeavor upon this, and even stone may shatter. But in the end, it was the sentinels who prevailed. All else was but pulp and gore...

"They are but the first wave," Archon-Ood lamented. "Their masters will soon arrive, and even the sentinels will not be able to hold them back. When the time is right, I will send them to destroy the Infinity Gate. The Osserians could not do so without destroying themselves, and so long as they were alive I would not."

"If you destroy the Gate," I suddenly realized, "won't you be destroying yourself as well?"

"It is a possibility, though that is my choice to make."

"You cannot do this mother!" Areana suddenly exclaimed. "The enemy does not know of what we hide. Only these two threaten our security. Give them to the enemy and they will leave us in peace."

"Be still, Areana!" the Watcher scolded. "My personal safety is secondary to that of the galaxy, and we do not betray our guests and friends! Besides, they are more important than you know, which is why you will depart with them."

"I do not wish to go with them," she responded, glaring at us before turning to her mistress with all the indignant fire she could muster. "I was created to protect you alone."

"You have served me well these many years. But it is they who now need your protection. This is not a punishment, Areana, but a reward. For too long you have been cooped up with me in this place. This is a chance for you to have freedom, to explore and enjoy what life has to offer. One day we will see each other again, on the other side if that is the Will of the Force."

"So you say," she said coldly. "If this is your will, I shall abide by it."

An awkward silence ensued, broken by a question I couldn't help but ask. "You believe in an afterlife?"

The Watcher's reaction of sudden colors and a rude sound reminded me once again of Mistress Mnemos. "You assume that because we are made of inorganic materials that our sapience is but sophisticated programming designed to mimic that of organic speech?"

"No, I didn't say that," I backpedaled. "I know you have a real personality and mind. It's just that I'm not even sure organic beings have spirits."

"In time, you will have more wisdom than you do now, but it is not I who will impart it. Now, you must go. I will transport you to your ship. They are out there, so be cautious! Areana will show you how to escape this realm. I bid you and your droid farewell!"

At that, the Watcher emitted a slow and melancholy tritone, followed by a discordant arrangement of notes, to which Cue-nyne beeped a lengthy interlude in return. Upon the screen, I saw a gigantic and loathsome form stalking the world in search of some prey, and glimpsed a train of hideous organisms floating in the skies above. And then, just like that, we were back above ground, near to our ship. Cue-nyne warned me to just run and not look behind me, and this time I listened. Areana entered at her own pace, haughtily striding off to a corner, apparently brooding. I hoped that when the time came, she'd help us, or at least keep her head on.

The XS-Explorer lifted-off. As we reached orbit, a deep, resounding BOOM went off! A kilometers-wide circumference sank into the earth. And with it, the Watcher who had stood watch for tens of thousands of years was no more.

Archon-Ood was no more.

We said our goodbyes to her and her long-deceased people, the stalwart Osserians who had triumphed over so much, and to this strange and sorrowful world that once housed a great and numerous human population who lost the war, not to Imperials or Sith or aliens from beyond, but to their own apathy, selfishness and greed.

Chapter 14: The Horror from Beyond

We had just departed the system and returned to the vicinity of the graveyard of ships when they arrived.

It had begun as a mere spot in the grey canopy of space. Then it started to grow, to spiral and fall inwards, turning inky as it spun in sulfurous swirls. From out of the fuliginous vortex, the ruinous avatars of my darkest visions stormed into view, three floating, cyclopean shapes of grasping, tentacled-arms that swam out from underneath a cube of iridescent, gilded shields. I shuddered to realize they matched the description given by Master Skywalker of the vampiric anomaly he'd encountered on Crseih Station years ago, an entity known as Waru! Could one of these approaching horrors be that very being?

They were followed by an array of tremendous, revolting annelids wearing absurd faces like the ceremonial death masques of the Hendanyn. The scientific part of my mind said they were likely kin or predecessor to the giant exogorths. Impossibly, they were each ridden by a winged humanoid shape, but against that grey and crimson sky, they appeared as opaque adumbrations, living shadows with baleful red eyes.

On the horizon stormed fantastical, evil-looking ships straight out of The Fourth Precept and other perverse holos. Some seemed alive and monstrous in size, with vertiginous, lancinating appendages and gaping maws!

And then something else emerged...

It was indistinct at first, a lacteal stain in space that expanded outward, like veins, to form a face. The "face" was like a flickering pale insectoid and deeply malevolent. Its venomous "eyes" stared out at us. With fibrous strands of stardust-taloned appendages, it seemed to reach forward with an outstretched talon...

Areana refused to move or even respond to us. Neither orders, pleads, or reasoning could make her as much as blink. She stood stock still as a mannequin, with only her mouth moving, whispering a phrase in some unknown tongue over and over. The Watcher said they'd been alerted to our arrival by something in space, but what if we'd been betrayed by Areana? I wanted nothing to do with this unstable replica droid. Had there been time, I'd have spaced her out the air-lock.

Cue-nyne was equipped with several grasping arms and appendages, which now came out to take over control of the ship, flying faster than the Explorer should allow, away from the nightmares spattering out unto space like blood from the stump of an exploded limb.

It was then that I heard the voices; they came from the floating cubes, for I could now see them as they had been in ages past when they traversed the gulfs between worlds, gliding above the lands of their thralls, the depraved hordes that served them as flesh-sacrifices to the incommensurable, feculent gods of dark Illathurion, Uthoqquan of flagitious Oozultharoum, miasmal Pnygatheem of the ossuary-world Xanthiir; Mhu'anThul in his black house deep in nefandous Mezzallmech; the pestilential Lotek'k of the charred worlds. Whether these names had been ones I'd found in my research, or whether they came to me now unbidden, I could not say.

"Come to us," the first sang buoyantly. "Hear the ancient tales of great Uthoqquan. Here are fortuities none have ever seen or tasted, endless knowledge beyond the enterprise of man for you alone to have. Shed your anxiety and made-up dreams of the light and float with us in the endless oceans of Oozultharoum."

"Come to us," the second inveigled seductively. "You know me. We belong together. I will extend to you the fulfillment of those deepest hidden desires which you have long sought. This and more, for all the riddles of the flesh are manifest to us and are yours for the taking. Come now, become as one with the wondrous Waru."

"Come to me," the third laughed liltingly. "For I am the incomparable Ooradryl and you have no reason to fear me. Free your mind from the untruth of good and evil, go beyond such mundane matters and I will bequeath to you a thousand uncharted worlds to rule and lifetimes to explore. Am I not your destiny who has guided you these long years, the reason for your very being?"

Those are the voices I heard and the visions I saw. So terrific was the pressure from them, it would have been a gift for my head to have exploded right then and there. But the perdurable philters of their tenebrific minds poking around, tasting, longing, was too much. "Do you have any idea what to do?!" I half-yelled before nausea overtook me.

"I do," said Cue-nyne, "but it won't be pretty (although I see that we're well past that.)"

"I trust your judgment," I grimaced, wiping my mouth. "Just get us as far away from here as possible!"

We seemed to outdistance them, but other things then came into view, vicious bat-winged blasphemies with enormous sharp-toothed mouths that I recognized as the hideous Wizards of the Night Spirit, they who roared in retribution for their lost queen; these and other nameless horrors followed in the demoniac train of their masters.

We dived deep into the graveyard of lost ships, but I could not so easily flee the susurrations of the hideous diablerie. That's when I knew that the visions had been true. This was the realm from which nightmares and terrors arose.

The epiphytic army behind was holding back. And I now understood why. Something else dwelt within this sphere beneath the maelstrom of orbiting wrecks. I could hear the ghastly altercation of alien minds claiming me for their own. I could feel their hunger, particularly that of Waru, for indeed that entity had traversed our stars before, and it knew well the taste of man.

As Areana continued chanting her horrible chant, the voices kept entreating in dolorous rhythm: There is no escape from the galaxy of fear. Join our voices in eternal song to the dread mother. Swim with us in the Oceans of Egestus. Feast on the sanguine juices of death and despair, and immortal you will be.

"You may find cause to question my judgment," my alloy companion stated, bringing me for a moment out of the pummeling, hateful visions. We flew now at risibly ferocious speeds, nearly splattering into the hulls of a dozen ships as we dove, spun, and whirled around the swirling masses. Over the course of thousands of years, hundreds of archaic wrecks had come to drift aimlessly in this noxious realm. But at the moment, blowing ourselves up was the far lesser of several evils.

"We have to get the coordinates from Areana," I said, and as if in response she suddenly appeared, headless, and wielding a long light-whip which she swung with both hands at me. I only just managed to jump back out of its path and received a painful red gash on my arm for my sluggishness. I spotted her head sitting at the station behind her, starry eyes alit, directing the body. The android Areana raised up her four-foot long tongue-whip to strike again.

"Hex... the head," the droid offered, fiercely piloting. "It houses the intelligence matrix that remotely controls the body."

It was good advice. Unfortunately, the headless body stood between me and my target, and I had nowhere to turn.

Then things got worse.

An enormous prehensile organ rose up below the ship. Cue-nyne deftly steered around it, but a dozen others suddenly shot up, hurling decaying ships out of the way to reach at any who veered close its lair. One of them grasped onto the Explorer, causing it a disconcerting lurch. The astromech fired a few laser cannons at the organ, causing it to lose its grip for a moment. And in that precious second, Cue-nyne corkscrewed around and away from it.

Areana's body lost balance, and I launched all my weight at her. The thing had surprising strength and tenacity, and recovered quickly, elbowing me in the sacral plexus and punching the side of my head. I was hurled back unto the spherical astrolabe, foolishly worried that the archaeological treasure we kept on board as decoration would be harmed. I was doubled over in pain when she rose up to her full height and lifted the light-whip above me. But I was also in the proximity of the android's commanding head.

"Don't destroy it," shouted Cue-nyne. "She's got all the information we need stored in her memory banks."

That wouldn't be a problem, I realized, as my blaster had been knocked from me in the tussle, leaving me weaponless. As she swung down to sever my own head from its neck, I grabbed at one of the astrolabe's rotating pointer rods that had broken off, and with its sharp end, stabbed it into one of the android's lucent eyes. The thing shrieked and began incanting over and over a string of different phrases in what I was certain were several long-dead languages.

"I don't suppose you want a translation," said Cue-nyne.

"It's not like there's anything else going on!"

"Don't worry, I can do more than one thing," Cue-nyne quipped as he wrenched the Explorer out of thick strands of web that began to shoot at it. "The first is one of the seldom known tenets of the Sorcerers of Rhand: 'Only power is real, and the only real power is the power to destroy. Existence is fleeting. Destruction is eternal...' The next one I've never heard before: 'In his lair at Aznak dead Typhojem waits dreaming...'"

"I change my mind." Desperate to silence the raging thing, I removed the rod and plunged it hard into the other eye. Smoke and fire emerged from the nostrils and mouth, followed by a popping noise and the sound of whirring as the body swayed and finally crumpled to the floor. The head uttered a last sibilant hiss before going dark.

"I might be able to retrieve the data," my pointy-headed pilot said.

"She's the one who summoned them, isn't she?"

"I don't know, Hex. I just know we're not out of the woods yet."

It went against my better judgment to look out the viewport at the scene outside. But as the jumble of ships briefly parted, I could see the bulk of the gargantuan thing below us, a nauseating mass of quivering pallid flesh. I dared gaze no longer on that which no sane mind could conceive. The monstrosity had no name that I knew of, so I called it the Void-Horror, for that's what it was, a thing that waited for aeons at the base of the wormhole, pulling in hapless vessels from realspace, peeling back the crippled ships' hulls to pluck out the terrified occupants within. The Cult of Five had flown in a vessel that could evade it. They may have even sent it victims. Was this one of the evil gods they worshipped? The few seconds I had gazed upon it were enough to burn an impression of that chimerical madness forever into my brain: a protoplasmic cancer with dozens of grasping tentacles, and a hundred malevolent eyes that puckered open and shut.

"We're too late!" I think I screamed. "They're everywhere!"

Although I knew then that we were doomed, I refused to submit to the inevitability of what was to come. Jumping in the gunner's seat, I savagely started shooting out lancing bolts of energy from the Explorer's front laser-cannons, hitting tentacles, tumbling ships, and whatever else might brave the path before us. A fierceness and unwavering drive now took over from all other emotions. There always seemed to be more, however, and the thing was growing frenzied as if it never felt the searing heat of a laser bolt. I fired with terrible abandon, and I cannot recall if it was minutes or hours that passed. Yet, for all our fury, it seemed to no avail. We were being herded and surrounded.

Another dozen of the Void-Horror's tentacles lifted up to surround our ship and close in around us, forcing us to climb far up out of the graveyard, only to loop over and descend right back in again when we saw what awaited outside. The gruesome army were now all around us. The enemy ships began firing when they spotted us, roiling balls of flame that exploded into the graveyard, demolishing vessels and setting aflame some of the Void-Horror's feelers. And the voices from the floating cubes continued to drone "There is no escape..."

"There is no escape," I repeated.

"Hex, what are you doing?"

"There is no escape... there isn't, but that doesn't mean we can't still take a few of them with us on our way out! Target the largest of them."

"Blaze of glory it is," Cue-nyne exclaimed.

An enormous blastray erupted from somewhere beyond the maelstrom, impacting on one of the foetid creatures or ships (it was difficult to tell). Then another beam, scattering the cube-like beings, followed by another, splitting open one of the exogorths, which spilled out a sickening cloud of entrails and shattered cartilage.

"What is that!?" I shouted.

"There's only one thing that can be," replied Cue-nyne.

"I thought she was gone!"

"She puts on a good show, doesn't she?"

"Why didn't she just tell us?" I asked, as another powerful blast rent through space.

"Maybe she's still protecting something... or someones. And she doesn't want anyone to know."

"Are you certain it's the Watcher?"

Cue-nyne didn't answer at first. "No, actually, I'm not."

I thought about it. Had some of the Osserians actually survived? Had they found a means to conquer the problem of reproduction? Or was she protecting her sentinels? "If it's her, she must be using the Infinity Gate?"

"Impossible to tell," Cue-nyne clipped as he dodged a determined tentacle. "She said the Firstborn had initially shared their discoveries with one another. The force of this blast is like the Guardian of Alashan."

"This is our chance to get out of here," I exclaimed. "The Rebels fleeing the Charon used a simple coordinate to escape Otherspace."

"Or so the reports say. I don't believe it's that simple. The coordinates in this dimension aren't so easy to ascertain in relation to realspace. With time, I could figure it out."

"The one thing we don't have!" Then, as suddenly as it started, the beams stopped firing. Our window of escape was closing. Just then, the head of Areana spoke... or rather croaked, its speech capacitors damaged. "The worms eat through time and space."

"Oh no, not this again!" Cue-nyne said.

"Wait, I don't think it's the same," I muttered. It was all the head said before falling silent, and nothing could cause it to speak again.

"The worms eat through time and space..." Cue-nyne repeated.

"The worms eat, as in make holes..." I crowed. "Wormholes! So, this has to be a two-way tunnel!"

"Impossible," Cue-nyne corrected. "Otherwise, they would have all come to realspace long before. Although... hmm, wait a minute. That's a possibility."

"Whatever it is, do it!" I said, dodging a new rain of conflagrant ships, talons, and firebolts, emboldened by the lack of protection. "We won't survive in here much longer!"

"This won't be easy," the droid stated.

"So, what's your grand plan!?"

"Oh, I never said it was grand," he replied, "but you'll have to steer the ship for a bit."

An array of impossibly long and jointed insectoid legs wrapped itself around the port side of the Explorer, halting its movement mid-flight. Mercifully, at the same time, a burning missile flashed across the creature's femurs and tibias, causing it to loosen its grasp. I slipped around, unfortunately right into the path of a giant exogorth which slammed headlong into our aft section.

"Our shields are gone after only one hit!" I howled. The diminutive robot didn't respond, having begun communicating with the ship and performing a series of technical manipulations, which included plugging Arena's head into a coiled cable that he fiercely ripped from the bulkhead. Praying he knew what he was doing, I maneuvered the corvette back on its heading, weaving in and out of a ferocity of deadly tentacles, hurtling fireballs and long-dead ships.

"Don't look now," I warned. Just then, the swirling mass of the wormhole appeared before us like the black storm of a raging god, annihilating all in its path.

"Head into the mouth of the tunnel," the droid urged.

"Are you sure?! I thought you said it was a one-way tunnel!"

"It is, but I'm pretty certain there's a trick to it that should give us a window," he said, turning his photoreceptor to me worriedly. "Kind of like the Endor Gate. Look, no guarantees, so don't go blaming me if we blow up, get sucked in the void, or wind up in the middle of a sun."

"I'll try not to. What now?"

"The Cult of the Five managed to jump in and out of here. Their ships' technology was far more advanced than ours. But we have her!" Cue-nyne pointed an appendage to the frightening head, its neck now attached to several cables. "I plotted a hyperjump at what I believe are the right coordinates. She should be able to course correct from our current location."

"Assuming she doesn't still hate us."

"Given our chances, I'd say death-by-calamitous-hyperjump-through-wormhole is preferable to any of the other options currently facing us."

And just then, those other options began to manifest.

As if they surmised our plan, into the chaos swam the three cyclopean horrors led by Ooradryl. Everything in their path was

invisibly hurled aside as they regally floated down into the whirling debris before them. They were followed by the tenebrous army of exogorths, Shadow Beings, giant-insect creature and her swarms, and the assorted army of grotesqueries.

The thing below now had new targets. Clearly, not all the monsters here were friends. One of its appendages wrapped around one of the exogorths and pulled it and its rider down. Another few snatched one of the living ships. I hadn't noticed a mouth on the thing earlier, nor did I care to now, but its victims vanished into some tremendous hoary opening that might have passed as a maw, and a rain of fireballs was launched at it in response.

"In case we don't make it," I said. "Sorry for dragging you into this. I just wish we gotten some hard evidence."

"I wouldn't have missed it for anything. But we do have evidence!"

"Her?" I asked, pointing to the remains of the human replica droid.

"No. The head has little life left, hopefully just enough to get out, if it can even do that."

"Well, don't keep me in suspense!"

"What do you think all that beeping was when the Watcher said goodbye? She wasn't serenading us; she was transmitting the Osserian's history records into my databanks!"

And before I could exclaim surprise or joy, there was a terrible sound of metal being rent, which could only mean one thing. Our ship was in their grasp!

And at that very moment, we jumped, heading the wrong way up a wormhole!

** **

We were back in realspace, but the XS-Explorer was catastrophically damaged, and in moments we'd be sucked right back into the dimension from which we'd barely escaped. Despite the protective crash webbing, I'd been thrown from the cockpit and was trapped underneath a fallen bulkhead. Thankfully, the hull hadn't yet ruptured, but that was a mere detail at this point.

"You have to go," I urged Cue-nyne. "Take a lifeboat. Get to Attahox; from there you can find your way to Dalaang or even Fusai. The information you carry is all that matters. I'll follow if I can."

"Arhul," he said glumly. In all the years I'd known him, he'd never called me that. "You know as well as I do that no one's going to accept the word of a droid. Not even one as advanced as I am. Without you, this information is as good as worthless. I'm going to try and lift this debris..."

"There's no time! The pull of the wormhole is exerting too much pressure. In moments, we'll both be trapped back in Otherspace. You have to go. You have to make them understand."

The droid was silent.

"Are you hearing me?!"

"Yes, but... Wait. No, I understand now. I'll see you later, Hex."

"I'll see you later, Q9-X7."

Chapter 15: A Droid's Tale

The room housing the members of the Historical Council and guests burst into shouting, accusations, and exclamations. Q9-X7 stepped forward, threatening to unleash another piercing shriek to silence them. Several covered their ears, but the room quieted down, all eyes upon the droid.

"Na'al! You've known me long enough to know I don't appreciate tricks!" Janzikek accused, a dark undercurrent in his voice as his predatory, reptilian nature asserted itself. "Are you telling me that *this* Q9-X7 astromech droid that you earlier referred to as 'Master Mnemon,' is actually Hextrophon's droid Cue-nyne?!"

"How many Q9s do you know?" Cue-nyne asked.

"Master Mnemon, um, Q9, it appears you've been keeping secrets from all of us," Na'al chided before the room's volume level shot up again.

"I haven't been keeping secrets," the droid responded. "Master Mnemon is the title Mistress Mnemos gave me. If any of you had bothered to look into my background—which you wouldn't because most of you still think of droids as little more than ambulatory gadgets to make your lives easier—" Several companion droids in the room chimed in with loud beeps, warbles, and articulations of assent, "then you'd have known that I was Hextrophon's companion."

"This isn't the time for a sermon on droids' rights," Na'al said before anyone else could raise a ruckus. "Perhaps you can tell us exactly what happened."

"Actually, I can answer that," Mungo Baobab said, standing up. "Auren and I found out from Mistress Mnemos what Arhul was planning. It seemed reckless to us, so we decided to follow his trail in the event that he needed backup. We arrived just in time to see his ship emerge from the wormhole. Actually, we weren't that far behind him. He should have only just entered a few minutes earlier, but I believe there's an explanation for that that will lend credence to Hextrophon's account."

"It's called a time dilation." This was spoken by Reina Solov. "Look, I may not accept all of this, but from a quantum physics perspective, it makes sense. It purportedly happens in hyperspace all the time, which is why ships are equipped with relativistic shields to compensate. Pocket dimensions, such as Otherspace, would see time flowing at a vastly different rate from the perspective of realspace. And, theoretically, if realspace is a 'secondary universe,' as the Watcher postulated, then we ourselves are within a separate pocket dimension and time moves differently here than in the Primary Universe."

"How does this support Hextrophon's account?" asked Janzikek.

"Well, if he was lying or delusional, as most of you are claiming," grunted Baobab, "then he'd have stayed away for hours or days to account for his time in Otherspace, not minutes! And time wasn't the only thing that was strange, and I've seen a lot over the years! Some... things... were holding on to the ship as it emerged... I can't describe them, but they were horrible. Then, there was a blinding flash as the wormhole spit out the Explorer. Whatever they were, they were thankfully gone. I made contact with Q9 and tracted the vessel in, bringing Hextrophon back to Chandrila."

"Where he recovered under my care," said Dr. Tonique, who had arrived earlier during Seldona's reading. "Over the years, Q9 and I had been helping him collate the voluminous amount of data he'd gathered. Now, with the history he'd obtained from the Watcher, we put together a relatively cohesive narrative. It can back up most of what Arhul wrote in his journal. After he convalesced, he thanked us and insisted he needed some time to himself. So, I departed back to university and Q9 went to Fusai to apprise Mistress Mnemos of their discoveries. Hextrophon's death came a few days afterwards."

"Which, as per his journal, he seemed to know about in advance," Tem Eliss reminded. "Q9, were you aware of these premonitions?"

"Yes," the droid admitted, "though I'm reluctant to mention it. The voices never wholly left Hex. I suspected that after his experience, some kind of tenuous connection was established between him and the beings in that sidereal realm. He had become depressed, angry, and preoccupied in the last few weeks. But the *real* reason he sent me and Dr. Tonique away was to protect us and to ensure that the information in the journal got out. That's why no one could know in advance that we were involved."

"You didn't fool me, even if you did fool Na'al," Professor Eliss said in his gravelly voice, but with a hint of amusement. "Can you explain to me how the journal contains pre-historic narrative elements that neither the Osserians nor the Watcher could have known? Otherwise, we're still only looking at myth and legend?"

"Hex didn't make any conclusions he didn't believe were true. As to how he came by the pre-historical information, those sections were composed later, after Dr. Tonique and I left. I received a coded transmission from him asking me to incorporate the added information."

"I presume you're referring to the epilogue. You are, of course, aware that these sections purport to have been composed *after* his death?" Eliss probed. "How do you account for that?"

"I can't. He reached out to me from another realm, a place the Jedi colloquially refer to as *Beyond Shadows*. I received the transmission two days after his death was reported. I have no doubt it was him, however, and I verified this with information only he would know."

Shock, anger, and nervous laughter broke out at this revelation, with not a few annoyed at the incorporation of "Jedi mysticism" in what they saw as a cheap attempt to bolster an improbable narrative. Demands were made to have Q9's testimony entered as evidence of malfunction and/or bias. Cue-nyne responded by calling them a gaggle of feleks.

That caused a wild-eyed Hanapen to shoot up: "How *dare* you presume to judge us, we who are your makers and natural superiors?! Based on this imaginative fiction, not to mention your deceptive manipulations, I make a motion that this fantasy be immediately filed in the Spurious Directories, where a special committee can determine what little legitimacy there might be amongst the mumbo-jumbo."

"Ironical that you of all people would question legitimacy," Cue-nyne intoned, drawing closer to where the Velmoc stood guffawing. "You and your companions have been trying to conceal these documents for a long time, haven't you? You know, you're not the only one who's been watching the Council." Cue-nyne then floated uncomfortably close to the Velmoc on his repulsorlifts

"You don't scare me, *machine*," Hanapen whispered darkly to him, "I've seen better than you shredded to pieces in agonizing screams of despair."

"I know you have," Cue-nyne responded. "Now it's your turn." The astromech suddenly whipped out several metal appendages; two of the ones that ended in large claws plunged deep into Hanapen's upper chest so that he couldn't move; another was a whirring buzzblade that Cue-nyne used to slice deep into Hanapen's neck. The Velmoc tried to pull away but was unable to dislodge himself while the blade shred deeper and deeper until Hanapen's tendons severed with wild ejaculations of dark green fluid that sprayed all over his associates until the head was finally seared off and bounced unto the floor.

It all happened so quickly that everyone just stared in horror and utter shock. Then after a moment, his companions rose up in a rush of clamor and motion to pull the droid off! But Cue-nyne echoed out in a loud, commanding voice, even as he continued to hold on to Hanapen's headless corpse, "Remain seated! All is not as it seems!"

Amidst the terror and confusion and screams, Palob Godalhi exclaimed, "Silence! That's not Velmoc blood!" Neither Hanapen's severed head, nor the opening in his body, showed a drop of the red ichor or pulpy gore that Hanapen should've spilled, only a green fetid exudation.

And then something even stranger happened.

An ebon thing, ink-like, and formed like that of a tall man, emerged out of the body from the neck and floated upwards like smoke from a cigarra. No features at all could be discerned upon its face or body, for the thing was etched in deepest shadow, but its eyes glowed with an ochre hatred. The ebon simulacra emitted a short subsonic noise, and in that briefest of seconds, if one looked to where the creature's face lifted, he would have seen not the Grand Hall's ornate ceiling, nor its elaborate, five-hundred-year-old Scillalian chandelier, but a vermillion and charcoal sky with pinprick black spots and eerily floating, moribund spheres. But the vision passed quickly, and the necromantic thing seemed to laugh. Then, like the accursed and sable demon it was, the Shadow Being shot up through the portal and into the beyond where it was never seen again.

The room erupted in released terror, with a great clamor that lasted a long while. Na'al used the time to have the building

personnel remove Hanapen's body and head. Cue-nyne eventually returned to his former place, though several in the crowd recoiled as he passed by them.

Janzikek's voice trembled as he was heard to say, "It must have been some kind of mutant Defel?"

"A Filar-Nitzan most likely!" another added.

"No, both are quite different," Hoole responded. "Nor was it any of the galaxy's shapeshifters. Even I cannot pass through solid walls."

"I've never seen anything like that before," said Wolam Tser, "though I've heard rumors."

"It was Hex's murderer," said Cue-nyne, "a Shadow Being. Some cultures call it a cacodemon, though they've had other names for it at other times. I initially thought it must have escaped into realspace when we came through the wormhole, hitching a ride unto the *Explorer* when the exogorths attacked. But I no longer think so."

"The exogorths must be what I saw!" exclaimed Baobab, pale as a ghost.

"Na'al, if this is some kind of elaborate hoax..." Janzikek warned, but even he seemed shaken. The whole room continued to sit in stunned silence, anxious for anything that would explain away the horror they'd just seen.

"I assure you, it's not," Na'al stated with a touch of annoyance. "Cue-nyne, you'd best have some explanations beside the supernatural!"

"Sorry to disappoint you, Na'al," Cue-nyne began, "but that's the *only* explanation. And I have evidence. I made a point of learning who each and every one of Hex's opponents would be, anyone who would have cause to see his work buried. Hanapen, as it turns out, was a high-ranking member of the Liberty Builders."

"Conspiracy nonsense," Janzikek spat. "Dozens of Council members have an affiliation with the Liberty Builders, probably more. They're a charitable organization, not worshipers of Bogan or Typhojem, or whatever delusion you and Hextrophon seem to believe."

"If you read their old texts, as I have," Cue-nyne stated undaunted, "you'll see they make no bones about their sacred symbols, philosophical beliefs, and origins coming directly from the Azurite Society of Lords, the Heinsnake Cult, and the Krath, all of which espouse ideas that are, for all intents and purposes, identical to that of the Sith and other dangerous groups, including belief in a 'shadow father' and the invocation of 'Old Ones,' though only higher-degree adepts are aware of this. I found such invocations in a secret room in the basement of Hanapen's home, a room covered in strange symbols. It was clear what he'd been doing."

"What had he been doing?" asked Na'al, despite himself.

"Abrić Hanapen summoned this thing a short while ago. He thought it would serve him as a kind of familiar, bring him greater prestige and power, and stop Hex's work from coming to light. He was wrong. The things he summoned do not serve any but their dread master. Hanapen was deceived. Once he let them in, they took him over completely, exsanguinated the body, performing a kind of embalming to prevent any hint of decomposition as the creature went about impersonating Hanapen."

"Practicing his religious beliefs, no matter how strange they seem, does not mean he was summoning a demon!" Janzikek practically shouted.

"You can judge for yourself. I took recordings. And keep in mind there is precedence for this kind of thing. I refer you to the evidence surrounding the childhood of the Sith Emperor Vitiate, as well as the uncovered journals of Hethrir, who belonged to another secret society, the Order of the Canted Circle, and who is responsible for the summoning of Waru from Otherspace, an order given from Palpatine himself after he learned of the existence of the Wizards of the Night Spirit above the Endor moon!"

"The former Procurator of Justice was probably as delusional as Hextrophon," quipped Professor Tenne. "This is speculation and proves nothing."

"You would say that, being a member of that secret society yourself. Mistress Mnemos helped decrypt your files. I think Mr. Ellis, Na'al and Godalhi will be very interested in reading what is basically a conspiracy to ensure that Hextrophon's datafiles were destroyed or sent to the SDs. That document is now in all your datapads."

It didn't take long for the Historical Society to read the decrypted files. They were damning enough to have Tenne and

Hanapen's immediate associates publicly censured and removed from the Council, with potential charges pending.

"Well, I am part of no conspiracy," demanded Janzikek, "and none of this justifies you slicing off Hanapen's head!"

"There's more," the droid said unfazed. "I also kept tabs on your families."

Janzikek uttered an exasperated sound of unbelief.

"The thing that impersonated Hanapen might fool his colleagues, but not his wife. Some weeks ago, she left him to stay with their eldest daughter. I took the liberty of interviewing Mrs. Hanapen and she admitted that she no longer knew the Velmoc she'd married. He'd not only become a virtual stranger to her, but she feared him."

"And on these grounds, you decided you should kill him?!" Janzikek exclaimed. "What if you'd been wrong?! All you've given us are unorthodox hobbies, some indiscretion on the part of the Obroan Institute, and the misgivings of his wife! Some of my own wives have said very same similar about me! Would you slice off my head as well?!"

"Much as that would bring me pleasure," Cue-nyne said with a gleam, "I did have a little more to go on than that. I make it a point to keep myself regularly upgraded with all the newest advances and modifications. For example, I'm outfitted with a sophisticated detection package that includes residual heat-trend directionalizer and molecular backtrack sniffer. For the technologically-challenged amongst you, these are scanning devices that can discern and follow the heat and chemical trails of a wide variety of organic beings. Hanapen's registered wrong. As I drew closer to him, I could detect that his body was not only emitting no heat-signature, but his chemical essence was not what it should have been. In short, Hanapen could not have been a Velmoc, not a living one anyway, and this confirmed that he was an energumen that must be destroyed."

"You could have said that at the start," Janzikek complained, but more quietly, clearly perturbed.

"I think perhaps a 'thank you' is in order," Na'al stated. "This has been... disturbing, to say the least. I suggest we deal with all of this at a later time, retire for a break, and perhaps a drink to collect our wits."

After thanking Hari Seldona, he concluded, "And any who still have the nerve, you can gather back here in two hours to complete the reading and hear the conclusions that Hextrophon went to such lengths to reveal. Master Mne... I mean, Q9, are you up to completing the remaining part of your former master's journal?"

"You'll hear it in his own words," Cue-nyne replied.

Part III: Firstborn of the Celestials and the Architects of Madness

Chapter 16: Songs of the Eternal

A vision granted me by one who roamed the stars in the barren galaxy...

In the dreamlike, empyreal days before the later universes came to be and the ages of time and decay fell upon them, a great light moved in the phantasmal mists of the endless void, uttering a sound, a primordial song, eldritch and beautiful beyond all things, and never heard again.

Stars winked on across the primary universe, like the glowing lanterns of Venexian ships along the mighty Solleu River at the behest of dusk, a garden of lights in the deep places and fathomless gulfs that were as yet barren and still. These were the cyclic and star polygons, the annulus and the arbelos, triquetra and lemniscates, and others of varying geometry and degree, the shining ones, luminous, and wise, comprised of those living creatures unknown to most, the Kērubīm, Ōphannīm, Śērāfīm, and Mal'ākīm, and others besides, regarded by some as the Celestials, who in the glittering firmament of that chatoyant light they danced to the music in abandon.

The circuit of life had begun with an ebullient energy spilling forth into the expectant vastness, a power like none other, to move and shape and grow. And from the source of light and life blossomed the Force, sown and harvested by the will of its Supreme Maker who is its eternal Lord, and the one who uttered the sounds. And the Force permeated all life and echoed back, and time began its desultory flow.

And a second and third sound rang forth, also vanished for all time, even more sublime than the first, intermingling with it, causing the world beneath the jeweled dome to ripen, awakening all manner of strange matter to life with the sounds, sweeter even than before, but also never heard again. And so that all life would always have a connection to its Maker and each other, the emissaries were brought about, microscopic and teeming midichlorians, and into every living thing, they found purchase, there to reside and ever await the voice of their Maker.

The luminous ones were as yet incomplete for the Maker had an endowment to bestow upon them, a gift of inestimable worth. So it came about that gathered there before the light of the Eternal, the Celestials were given the gift and came fully to comprehend love, justice, power and wisdom, the pure origins of the Four Precepts, and were tasked to learn of the universe they were to help germinate and configure, and in so doing, were free to roam and frolic amongst the vast expanse. Many among the Celestials descended to the Plane of Erets and there reshaped themselves into forms that harmonized with those beings, feline, avian, bovine, and human, that yet dwelt in peace there.

Erets was then beautiful and alluring beyond compare, with every element upon it an intoxicant so varied and unique that they could not help but fall in love with the dawn world, for they were to be companions and helpers to its sentient and sapient inhabitants, and associated with its various elements, and so it was that Erets surpassed even the vast splendor they had known in the mysterious cosmos.

There is much that occurred in the earliest days of the tiny movers, who dwelt upon the Plane of Erets in the Primary Universe, but that does not come into this account, save that with the coming of the younger race the final song was nearing its conclusion.

Yet, discordant notes entered at this time with those who coveted the dawn world, for the thought of domination had entered at this time, and a deep shadow began to occlude Erets borne of those who had fallen amongst the luminous stars, led by a shining one, the Nākhāsh, who became the Father of Shadows, and it swept quickly upon Erets, from which the long war between the dark powers and the elder races began, spreading like foaming seas upon barren plains to engulf the tiny movers, amongst whom it still it rages.

The Celestials did all they could to provide succor for the innocent, all the while grieving the ruination that had been brought, and while some were a vast host of powerful warriors, others were not made for such violence and cruelty, and their original purpose was thwarted. Yet some good arose, and a splinter of the shining host were given leave to prepare seed pods that would

make up new dimensions for which they might birth anew the phantasies of their minds, and they considered the terrestrial and aquatic shapes they might devise for others. But they were not yet to cast any shape, nor to harvest the four cosmic seed pods until the song was ended, and they were cautioned that evil would seek to find its way into all realms and times.

Chapter 17: Progeny

Departing the dawn world despoiled by the monstrous offspring of those dark powers, the Celestials spent long years shaping worlds of their own making until their period of fertile progeneration at last arrived and a new universe came into being. Each realm was connected to and derived from the Primary Universe, though some were vast and quite different in form and function. These took the longest to fashion.

Chief amongst the four Celestials who envisioned and fashioned that realm which became known as the Skyriver universe was Lluxos, who his helpers called in their tongue "earth-worker," for the phantasms he shaped were an encomium to the fauna and flora they'd adored on the lands and seas of Erets so long ago, and there was no end to the derivations they could fashion from them. Besides Lluxos were Marutz, Xurz, and Wutzek. These appeared as glowing conglomerations of pastel sapphire and white globes. They were later joined by three others, Elegast, Eipha, and Niphal.

Circean in intrigue, diverting and wondrous were the strange and organic protista, the peculiar monera, the alluring and myriad flora, and the spongia and minerale that they created; but it was perhaps the legion of fauna that offered the greatest of Sybaritic joys and amusement. So intrigued were the Celestials by these, they would later shape sapients just like them, new races that resembled the lifeforms large and small that populated the air, land, seas, and spaces, with numerous and variant concordances based upon the neoteric protoplast of the races of Erets.

Wutzek, however, had remained deeply scornful of those fallen cognates and disdainful of the tiny movers who so readily fell prey to deception and violence, and he sought to fashion beings who would not falter, but who could use their power to guide the coming inhabitants of the new dimension. Wutzek knew he should have informed Lluxos and the others of his intent, but a thought had occurred to him that perhaps they would reject his idea. Better to do what needed to be done. They would thank him later. Yet with this secret came a rush of discordant feelings of egotism, remoteness, impatience, and apathy, emotions that he had not experienced before and did not particularly care for, and the sounds of dissonance were awakened in him, for in his bitterness and resentment, that dark song had yet remained, hidden deep within him, and now it was poured into those entities which he brought into being.

Nebulous as swirls and splashes of color were his four offspring, alive with great untapped power, beautiful and unique, but born as they were out of Wutzek's conflicting states, each took on that discordant trait, and so required the others to remain in balance. Thus, he named each after that which impelled their creation, and in so doing, reached into their essence and shaped them.

The first was named Tilotny, which in the tongue of the Celestials meant speech, art, and pride. As she was represented by mass, she was shaped in the image of the most beautiful of sapient forms. The second was called Horliss-Horliss, a derivation of one who is outside, timeless, emancipating. Represented by formless mass, he was given a surrealist form. The third was Cold Danda Sine, which denoted dynamism and change. Cold Danda Sine was represented by the mystery and excitement of masslessness and was embodied as a dark circle, though a face could be discerned in its penumbra. Last, but not least was Splendid Ap, a name belonging to the diagnostic principles of time, motion, and space. Splendid Ap was represented by abstraction and was shaped like a pyramid in a flux of motion, time and space.

Skyriver's four seed pods were filled with elements that would enable the new universe to flourish as it spread out from the center from which the Celestials were to inhabit. Each of Wutzek's progeny were birthed in secret, however, so that when Lluxos arrived in Wutzek's presence, Wutzek felt a terrible pang of remorse. Confessing what he'd done, he said plaintively: "My offspring were intended to embody love, justice, power, and wisdom, and yet they are flawed, so that if even one is not present, they will be out of balance, and from them will come instead egotism, remoteness, impatience, and apathy, and war will reign as king, and suffering will dominate as mistress to the children of the stars. I fear that due to my anger and pride, this terrible darkness will arise in our universe so that the very thing which I sought to prevent will come to pass."

Lluxos responded "The Father of Lights has sent me a vision concerning that of which you speak, for we were told that evil

would enter into our realm, though I had not expected it to be so soon. Yet, for many ages, a shroud will darken the galaxy, though not for all time, and not to the eradication of all life. Into each age will come those who will fight for the light.”

Wutzek, in the throes of grief and shame, said, “Perhaps I should unmake my progeny and forestall this calamity,” but he discovered to his horror that they were no longer there. Wutzek scanned the universe, but could not find them. “Now I have made matters worse! How can they have disappeared?”

“Although he does not fully understand his unique gift, Splendid Ap has discovered the World between Worlds, from which we created our new realm, and has opened a window, projecting a potential future, an inchoate echo of what may be. There, they have left a future imprint of themselves. When the stream of time catches up to where this eidolon awaits, it will come to life as if anew.”

“This dimension of ours may be tractable, but this cannot be done without consequence,” Wutzek exclaimed.

“Indeed, it cannot,” Lluxos agreed. “For Ap has carelessly imprinted upon something that is not. In so doing, he has not only directed the stream but split it, forcing into being a second universe, a copy of our own in which their actions must take place. Ah, and as we speak,” Lluxos added, for he was given the gift of farsight and could see into their actions, “Splendid Ap has deigned to move to yet another point that will arrive shortly after the Firstborn have been established. In this, however, he has used far more care, for he must have realized his error. They are now embedded at a singular point in time and will remain frozen until that time organically transpires. You will see your offspring then, for they will shape the way this new galaxy proceeds from that moment forward.”

Wutzek was speechless. “Where are they now?”

“They are in essence nowhere. They will come again into existence when the time-stream catches up, though for them it will seem as if only moments have passed. And I fear they will not be alone, for the shadows watch all deeds and misdeeds.”

“There is much harm they can do. They are inexperienced and bereft of love or guidance. Should we not implore the Lord of Spirits to will this terrible thing away?”

“It is not his will to force any against their will to choose love, peace, justice, and wisdom lest there not exist those things, but only the domination of mindless servitude. Thus, it is said this gift of freedom is greater still, and to choose love the greatest response to it. Each of your offspring, as each of my offspring, must be allowed their free course: love and compassion with light and life; hate and destruction with darkness and death. All are even free to change their course should they choose so.”

“They will fear us,” Wutzek contemplated, “and will not know light from darkness?”

“They were not deprived of a conscience,” Lluxos clarified. “And I will send some to speak with them.”

“I understand, but I do not know how I will bear it.”

“Just as your form shifts and swirls, so too is your mind in turmoil, but take heart! A great time of good and evil must pass in which many things must come about and be tested so that it is proven for all time and by demonstration that the course of darkness is the road to ruination. Then a new thing will be brought to fruition, and those who have chosen the light will remain forever in it. Do not let your soul be anxious, for that which will be introduced would have been introduced anyway.”

* *

The Force-endowed abilities of the Firstborn of the Celestials birthed into Skyriver ranged from the power to create wondrous marvels of organic and archaean form, to move and shape matter with their hands and minds, to aggregate elements for the building of civilizations and worlds, and other enigmatic gifts. All were designed as beings of grace and power, for they were to one day take their place alongside the Celestials, who it was said would not always remain, but were destined for tasks in unknown times and other realms. As the seven Celestials settled upon seven satellite galaxies that orbited the larger galaxies, the Firstborn were thus prepared to become the guardians and guides to their own offspring, the lifeforms they would soon bring into existence.

The Firstborn consisted of the breathtaking Duinuogwuin, the shining Kwoth, the brilliant Gree, the beautiful Diathim, the

modest Sharu, the noble Mu-Ab, the wondrous Cthol, the magnificent Alashan, the solemn Ahra Naffi, the humble Kalai, the astonishing Killiks, the awe-inspiring Tempestro, the patient Neti, the curious Lucent, the spiritual Aing-Tii, the wise Sunesi, the gifted Sephi, the graceful Oswaft, the playful Catuman, the energetic Shola, the thoughtful Pelgrin, the intrepid Volgax, the remarkable Pa Tho, the gentle Asmeru, the adventurous Jerrilek, the creative Xaxax, the scholarly Eellayin, the soulful Kooroo, the spirited Osserians, the sagacious Krevaaki, the peace-loving Caamasi, the inquiring Siniteen, the reverent Ithorian, the visionary Hysalrian, the shrewd Dur Sabon, the crafty Celegians, the mysterious Whills, and others besides, eighty in all who made up the Firstborn, each powerful in the Force, and wise, as the Celestials passed on to them wisdom, justice, power and love, and worlds in which to thrive and multiply on.

The Firstborn shared with each other the knowledge and gifts they each had. Thus, the Gree gave the nascent galaxy the Hypergates, portals that allowed the Firstborn to travel onto any world of their choosing for the purpose of communion with one another, as well as the apportioning of goods, so that all would know their kindred among the stars and create a galactic nexus of affinity and interdependence. Knowledge and helpful crafts were exchanged, as were flora and fauna, where appropriate, and these became ubiquitous throughout the galaxy as the Firstborn gifted them to their galactic cousins across the stars and, soon, their own offspring.

After the Celestials and their offspring prepared worlds for the many new races and creatures to come forth, propaedeutics began for the Firstborn, and this they did in abundance so that the galaxy soon came to be filled with a multifarious array of beings who were as beloved children to the Firstborn and Celestials. Numerous simian, felid, canid, avian, saurian, humanoid, and rodent forms came to be, along with a mélange of ichthyoids, arthropods, and botanical species. The Firstborn found great amusement in some of their newly formed lifeforms, such as the anthropomorphic lagomorph, capra, and ursus races. But besides those based on already-existing forms, new shapes were invented that had never before been seen, inhabitants designed for the most inhospitable of worlds. And all at this time paid reverence to their guides, the Celestials, and to the Prime Shaper who made them all.

Food grew abundantly on each world, specific to the requirements and pleasure of each race, and with the shared knowledge there was no end to the variety that could be brought forth from the lands and seas. Peace reigned among the generations of the Firstborn for whom it was a somnolent Golden Age of vernal splendor and joy. Their growing, hale offspring spread across the cosmic spectrum, a tabula rasa of interlaced solace in a parallax of perpetuity.

Yet, as with those on Erets, the penumbra of death found its way to Skyriver when the Architects of Desolation arrived, bringing with them the dual and opposing forces of desire and fear, which inevitably proved irresistible. It was shortly after this time that humans bridged the chasm from their world into the worlds of the Firstborn.

Chapter 18: Shapes of Things to Come

Of Tilotny

Of the four of Wutzek's progeny, Tilotny had awoken first and saw all the beauty and grandeur of the galactic gardens around her and the beings that dwelt there. Her own form was as yet amorphous, and thinking it pale and small in comparison, she felt shame and dismay. Furthermore, she could hear a grand discourse, and perceiving that she was less wise than those speaking, felt mortification. She tried to hide the fact that she'd awoken and remained as one somnambulant. It was then she heard her name, and her form was shaped into that of the most beautiful of beings, and she knew pride and joy. The names of those who must be her siblings were named, and she felt the connection between them, but soon one of them feared that a great evil was to come upon them by a towering being of swirling lights; and in her heart she felt terror, but also loathing towards this being, distraught that the one who shaped her would seek to take her life.

Before she knew it, she, Horliss-Horliss, Cold Danda Sine and Splendid Ap whisked away to elsewhere. She determined then that she would never again be pale or small or less significant than any other. Ap took them to a new place, where she espied from afar beings that went about on a shadowy world below. Now that Tilotny saw that she was still the most beautiful of all creatures, she decided that she must also be the wisest as well, for a strange voice whispered this to her, telling her she was a goddess, so she determined that it must have been her who begat all things, and for these reasons had the being of shimmering lights been jealous and wished her harm. She would do whatever was necessary to ensure her power and greatness in the face of this existential threat.

Horliss-Horliss was a strange liquescent form that secretly alarmed her, for she had never conceived it before, and this confounded her newfound belief that she was a goddess. Next came Cold Danda Sine who took the shape of a dark sphere with a fiery face and spoke of the pleasure of the void and the sublimity of anti-concepts. She didn't understand yet what those were, but she would soon find out! Splendid Ap came last, taking a flickering conical shape. Rather odd she thought, but she recognized Ap's potential. In all, she loved and feared her siblings, but the voice inside her said she was a goddess and must rule them.

Arguing her supremacy with Horliss-Horliss had grown pointless by the time a tiny mover appeared on the surface of the planet before them. Tilotny was abashed to see a human creature that bore a similar shape to hers (though not as beautiful). Horliss-Horliss thought Tilotny had shaped the tiny mover. Perhaps she did. Was she not the goddess, after all, shaper of all the up-and-down things that were substance and form? Even time must be of her making, for the voice told her as much. That she had no memory of having done so concerned her, but she pushed it aside.

But then, three other tiny movers arrived, covered in a white shell and sharing the same form. After mocking her for her redundancy, Tilotny changed one of the white-shelled ones into diamond. Horliss-Horliss thought a more subtle refinement would be to change the heart of the first mover into diamond so that it suddenly became an unliving thing. Was this what the being of lights had wanted for her? Tilotny had to prove herself more artful and twisted the other three into one screaming, multi-limbed form, and soon they too became unliving. Cold Danda Sine called it tasteless, and Horliss-Horliss found it disorderly. Tilotny was forced to admit that it was, and in the deepest part of her heart she felt a sickening premonition which disturbed her. "A goddess must be strong." Is that not what the voice had said? Yet there was another voice that emanated from deep within her which warned her to avoid this strange voice and do what was good and right, but this she shunted away. Horliss-Horliss ordered her to tidy up the mess, but no one ordered her, and she commanded Splendid Ap to do it. Thus, Tilotny departed, wondering at the role of a goddess.

Of Horliss-Horliss

When Horliss-Horliss awoke, he saw his maker, a being of lights, pronounce his name and give him the form of a nebulous, ever-changing shape of wondrous glory. He paid attention to the discussion that ensued between his maker and another maker similar to him and heard his maker wonder if their unmaking might be best for the universe. Horliss-Horliss felt it was wrong that

he should suffer such a thing. Then, before he knew it, Splendid Ap connected to him, relaying his thoughts, and grasping on to the others, they shifted to elsewhere, forward in time and space. It was an unpleasant experience, but they were safe from their maker.

Tilotny's first words to him were boasts that she had invented shape, substance, and time! Impossible, for he recalled there were others in the place where he and Tilotny first came into being, and he knew his new shape was of his essence, formed by him and his maker alone. A strange voice muttered that he was a god who should rule all others, but he immediately dismissed such a notion as foolish. Tilotny's vanity and delusion were annoying enough, but soon Cold Danda Sine and Splendid Ap materialized.

Then another being appeared on the planet below, a tiny mover. Could Tilotny have actually made this one? The voice told him she had, but he wasn't certain. Other tiny shapes arrived, three identical ones in white shells. Tilotny turned one into diamond. The sensation he felt when it died unnerved him, but the voice told Horliss-Horliss to show them how he could make a more subtle refinement. Horliss-Horliss was anxious to show up the vain Tilotny, and so he turned the soft, pulsing interior of the first mover into a more beautiful but harder substance. Then, suddenly, the tiny mover ceased to move as well, and Horliss-Horliss felt a light go out when that occurred.

"This must be death," he thought. For the first time, Horliss-Horliss felt remorse, and he learned something about the universe then, recognizing that if it was wrong for his light to be put out, so too was it wrong to put out the lights of others. Tilotny, oblivious to his thoughts, had twisted the other three into one ugly mass, and three small lights flickered out there as well.

Since Tilotny claimed the tiny mover as her own, she should repair the disorder. But she would not, and this told him something too. So Horliss-Horliss tasked Splendid Ap to fix the problem. This was as well, for there was more to Ap than Tilotny seemed to think.

At present, Horliss-Horliss wished to see no more of shapes and forms, especially with Tilotny and Cold Danda Sine present, for he perceived that the former was vain and reckless, while the latter was contrary and impatient, and another voice deep inside him said that in his absence many lights would flicker out and a blanket of darkness would cover the expanse so that nothing would be left but the volatile speech of Tilotny and the cold sovereignty of Cold Danda Sine.

Splendid Ap opened a gate back in time to where shapes and forms dwelt peacefully on every world, and Horliss-Horliss espied Tilotny's jealousy and Cold Danda Sine's burning anxiety to bring forth strange things. Horliss-Horliss cautioned them, noting that he now understood something he hadn't before. The others in this galaxy were in many ways like them, creatures with sentience and desires, and as Tilotny did not wish to be interfered with, neither did they. But Tilotny countered that these were lesser beings, neither as powerful nor as wise as she. Should they not be directed by those who were their betters? Horliss-Horliss argued that they had the Celestials to guide them, but Tilotny noted that it was a Celestial who had wanted to destroy them. Horliss-Horliss countered that they were likely not all the same, but Tilotny concluded that she and her siblings were destined to rule, and it was for this reason alone that the Celestials wished to see them destroyed. Horliss-Horliss did not have all the answers, and though a part of him said that he should stay to watch over his siblings, he was angered by Tilotny so that what he said was this: "Will you come with me to another place that is not inhabited, and which we can call our own?" When she said no, he said: "Then I will neither oppose you nor be induced to take part in your designs," and so he departed for other realms.

Of Cold Danda Sine

Ah, the thrill of it all! Cold Danda Sine burned with the fire of life! Newness! Energy! Motion! His form, a dark sphere with rivulets of firelight etching a face against the black surface! All things excited him. When he heard that he was to be destroyed, he thought 'How wondrous destruction must be!'

But it was not to be. The inestimable Horliss-Horliss and the strangely wonderful Splendid Ap directed them somewhere else. This was exciting too, and he helped propel them forwards! Tilotny was truly beautiful but her boasts quickly grew old, and he thought it would be amusing to antagonize her! Horliss-Horliss was a wild thing and exciting! Was this his maker and the maker of all things? He had memories of another, but he did not put much stock in old and upsetting things and Horliss-Horliss was before

him now in all his splendor! But no, his sister, Tilotny, claimed to have made matter and time. He did not think so. She did not conceive the anti-concepts, for that was Cold Danda Sine's own specialty, and he grew anxious to test them out!

But what was this?! A new form! A tiny mover crept upon the surface of the earth. Horliss-Horliss must be the maker after all! But no, again he denied it, and again dull Tilotny took the credit. But then three other identical movers appeared! If Tilotny was the maker, she was a repetitive one!

Then an odd thing occurred. Tilotny turned the little mover into a dead thing. Horliss-Horliss followed suit! This was strangely upsetting! Tasteless Tilotny proved she could repeat this skill by making the others unmoving too. This disturbed him greatly, for he perceived that it was unjust and evil, but a strange voice quietly murmured to him that it was exciting to watch the drama unfold. Perhaps it was. Conflicting feelings raged inside him.

The voice said he could do much better things, new, antithetical, and opposite things! Horliss-Horliss and Tilotny argued about restoring the lifeless ones; was life and death as casual as this? Cold Danda Sine was both repelled and fascinated. He did not want part in this grotesque drama. And yet the voice said this was the way of the world; it was ugly and cruel, but he was above it all, and the worlds were his to play in, all that he craved, and what he craved was novelty, contest, and experiment!

Splendid Ap, who struggled with up and down and backward and forwards, but was a better shaper than dull Tilotny, opened a door, and Cold Danda Sine rushed through it!

Ah, a younger galaxy teeming with powerful beings! Tilotny craved their worship, and he surmised that she was angry at having failed to receive the love of her maker. Cold Danda Sine would not think upon him, and besides, he had other plans. Horliss-Horliss asked them to depart for barren worlds where no other lifeforms existed. To the ears of Cold Danda Sine, this sounded dreary and tiresome. Cold Danda Sine had great love for Horliss-Horliss and was grief-stricken when he declared that he would abandon them (first his maker, now his brother), but he would not withdraw into the shadows of dead places. "See?" the voice said. It was best not to feel for others, for such emotions threatened to enervate and freeze him. Thus, he discarded them and perceived now that perhaps there was no maker of movers or laws, and if there was it didn't matter. Cold Danda would enjoy himself. There was much to do, and a whole galaxy in which to do it!

Of Splendid Ap

Tilotny was the first to register a threat to her being. Cold Danda Sine felt it would be a sublime joy to experience. Horliss-Horliss wondered at the meaning of it. Splendid Ap saw the confusion, consternation, and excitement among his agnates, and joined with them to move out of the way of this perceived danger. Ap was new to life and did not yet fully understand his powers, but he knew that moving through space would not avail them freedom, for his maker was powerful, so he'd have to move through time.

From a place in which there was no time, he could see windows laid out before him like equations. He'd have liked to have examined them, but a strange voice said that he did not have time, but neither did he have to obey the laws of time. He was a god who could create his own reality. This was odd, but if true, how? He could not rewind that which had already occurred, and even if he could, they would be discovered. Nor could he project forward through time, as time itself could not be jumped, and even if it could, they would be frozen until the stream of time arrived. And what if the stream did not go according to this projection? There were millions of other ways it could travel. No, he'd need another option that would ensure they would not disappear.

He tried at first to peer outside the dimensional walls, but he discerned that they were bound to this dimension and that it would be dangerous to venture beyond it. Then he saw it. This was one of several dimensions made by beings akin to the one who made him. With a small pocket dimension, he could project himself and his cognates into a probable future and disappear from the present.

In the split-second it had taken him to reach the timeless World between Worlds, he projected this potential future all the while creating a small bubble reflection of the original realm from which they'd escaped, tethering it to the original realm to ensure that the stream of time would have to arrive and provide them escape.

So, "moving forward" into the projection of time, they appeared above a far-off astronomical body orbiting a central, self-

luminous heat source around which several other planetary bodies revolved. Because this was only a best-projection of what the future might be, and not yet the future itself, it was a strange and shadowy realm. When time caught up, the two dimensions would converge, and a bridge would be created from this pocket dimension to the original one through a temporal rift at this location in space.

At that point, this cloned world would forever disappear. Then suddenly he realized that if they left any imprint in this continuum, it would create anomalies and echoes, and he wasn't quite sure yet of the consequences. He sensed then that he'd tampered with intrinsic and irresolute laws that he ought not have.

He was about to tell his cognates that they needed to depart, but then he saw one of the tiny movers. Splendid Ap tried to convey his concern to his associates, but they could not understand the concepts. Imagining that he was being silly or unduly worried, they returned to arguments over the nature of form and things which he perceived had lesser value. Perhaps the tiny mover would move on. But then they saw it too! "You are far greater in intelligence than they," said the strange voice. Ap didn't know about that, but he began to ponder where he belonged in the larger scheme of things? Did he even belong? His maker seemed to think not. What of these argumentative agnates who knew nothing of these dilemmas? "One such as you is a god." Ap disagreed, perceiving only that despite their conflicts they needed each other.

The tiny mover was a female being of some kind, a future projection of someone who would one day arrive at this dimensional crossing. What were the chances that of all the vast space and time, she would arrive at this barren world in this barren sector of space at this very moment that they'd arrived? Infinitesimally small. The female was indistinct at first, for her specific identity had not yet come to be. And she wasn't alone. She was pursued by three males, covered in some form of protective plating. Their intent was clear enough.

As a result of his siblings' argument, Horliss-Horliss did the unthinkable and turned the female's heart into diamond, so that she died and the doorways vanished from before her. Splendid Ap was not a creature that could readily comprehend sorrow, so he did not mourn her per se. But he did perceive it was another terrible violation. The others that had pursued her were then also transformed into unliving matter. This was not the time or place for such things! Horliss-Horliss seemed to sense this too and requested Ap to correct it.

Splendid Ap was getting practice at least. Of the tiny movers, he found it was not a difficult thing to restore them to the way they had been just before he'd encountered them. He could not alter their memories, for he could not perceive who would be stepping through the rift that far in the future, only that somebody would, but he could repair what was going to be broken.

"They are of no consequence," said the voice, but he ignored it. Pondering the quantum possibilities, for Ap tended to think mathematically, he calculated that he could remove the male pursuers away so that they could not harm the female, as that had been their intended goal, and it would be disconcerting to fix them only for them to become unliving again. He opened up a strange door backwards which led to other strange corridors and more doors, in infinite sequence. Perceiving via probability, based on the existent situation of everything currently moving in space and time, a way to re-enter reality, his vision clarified to a single door at the end of one of the infinite long corridors, and pushed the belligerent male pursuers into it. How they fared after that was up to them. "They will have fought and died on the very spot you placed them," said the voice. "You waste your time on such irrelevant matters, for they are as insects to one such as you."

He then repaired the female. She was safe, at least. Now, to restore himself and his agnates. More carefully, he pushed again. This restored them to their original world, but to a moment just a bit further in the future than when they were created, for he did not wish for their maker to find and destroy them. This time, however, he did not require a pocket dimension. Instead, he would merely implant them at that point in time, as he'd first conceived. It would mean they would be suspended in a frozen limbo until time caught up to them naturally, but he discerned from deep within that they would be safe and wouldn't notice the lag when they awoke.

Splendid Ap sought to seal the pocket dimension behind him, but something wasn't quite right. Then he remembered the error! Their actions with the tiny movers would leave behind an echo of them at a projected future moment in time. Even worse, the small bubble that had been the pocket dimension would not cease to exist, as it ought to, but would continue to grow. He, in

essence, created a parallel dimension that would begin to develop its own separate history and timeline based on—but apart from—its original. Yet it had no true beginning, save the one he gave it, and its path would follow a different trajectory from the original. Without the investment of the Celestials working on it, developing it into an interwoven fabric, and without even his hand upon it, it would only ever be hollow and sterile, a pale and broken imitation of a far greater thing.

Splendid Ap was uncertain about his temporal prowess but puzzled at the emotional component in some of his decisions. “Such things are a hindrance,” the voice said, and he believed it. Not yet convinced that emotions of any kind were beneficial, let alone the emotions of other sentient beings, he clamped down on his own and imprinted himself at the point in space and time where he’d sent his cognates

The idolons they had left behind of themselves would millennia later reemerge in the temporal bridge between dimensions in the Bedlam Pulsar near the planet Bedlam, during the Galactic Civil War. Princess Leia and the Stormtroopers that pursued her would be the tiny movers that Tilotny and the others would encounter there. Upon the conclusion of their experiment with them, the idolons would disappear and the dimensions would separate, never to bridge again.

When time caught up with them again, what appeared as mere seconds to them, Ap found Horliss-Horliss arguing issues of ethics with Tilotny who countered with their superiority and destiny to rule. Horliss-Horliss proposed going to a world devoid of all others, but Tilotny and Cold Danda Sine agreed that this was not their desire. He would have preferred that Horliss-Horliss remain with them, but he did not wish to remain in their company... was it from disdain? Ap reasoned, based upon the highest likelihood of acquiring what he wanted, that the best course would be to go with Tilotny and Cold Danda Sine, determining that alongside them he would acquire ultimate knowledge... The morality that Horliss-Horliss was so concerned with did not seem to be of greater importance.

Chapter 19: Their Cold Sovereignty

Although not yet as vain, deceitful, and jealous as she was to become, Tilotny was nonetheless cunning and determined. With Horliss-Horliss absent, however, she grew imbalanced and more prone towards a selfish course. Fearful that Cold Danda Sine and Splendid Ap would also depart, she promised to Splendid Ap endless knowledge and learning, and to Cold Danda Sine the opportunity to bring forth new things without constraint. For their part, they were yet without malice, for they were as unruly children who did not fully comprehend matters of good and evil. But this was to change.

Tilotny and her siblings were approached at this time by Lluxos, who imparted Wutzek's remorse for having uttered the rash statement they'd overheard and offered them the opportunity of joining the Celestials. For a moment they perceived the harmony, warmth, and joy a reunion with others of their kind would bring, but Tilotny snuffed out such feelings and quickly warned Ap and Sine that this was likely a trap designed by Wutzek to fulfill his intent of destroying them. Deep down she did not truly believe this, but a part of her feared that joining the Celestials would mean laying down her godhood and returning to a quotidian state. So she twisted the sincere offer of love and friendship for suspicion and the prevarication that their greatness was feared by the Celestials. For his part, Cold Danda Sine did not trust anyone, but as Tilotny was the devil he knew, he would stick with her for the time. Splendid Ap was uncertain, but logic dictated that if one of the Celestials wished them harm—and these beings were united—then all of them might wish them harm. Had Horliss-Horliss remained with them, however, things would have gone differently.

The three traversed the galaxy for a long time, espying the races of the Firstborn and the Celestials that were as sentinels, and Tilotny grew jealous. She could at any time have appealed to the Celestials to join them, but the longer she stood apart from them, the more she felt alienated and bitter at her lot. She would not humble herself to such ones. No, she would find her own way.

Tilotny discovered she held no direct power over anyone, but might she effect change through other means? There is much they conceived and planned during this period which is veiled, but it was the start of their turn to darkness.

At last, they discovered the means of ridding the galaxy of the Celestials. They had a fatal weakness: the Celestials were not masters of their offspring, but merely guides. If they, or the principles they held aloft, were rejected by any of their protected races, they would be forced to depart, for the Supreme Maker had long before issued a decree that they could not interfere with the free will of any sapient race. How odd! What good was it to be Supreme Maker if one did not command those one made? Tilotny would prove far better.

After many years in which the rogue offspring of Wutzek were neither seen nor heard from, Tilotny put her plan in motion, tasking Splendid Ap to create windows on every world so that the Firstborn and all their offspring would see them appear as colossal apparitions in the sky, and hear Tilotny's echoing voice. She gave herself the name Onrai, which meant "honor," to reflect the esteem and reverence her role as mother-goddess should bring. She had knowledge that in distant times in the past, the name had an older connotation, which meant without light, and as the Celestials were Beings of Light, this seemed an appropriate moniker for her, for she would soon snuff out their light.³

"Children of the galaxy, I am the Architect who shaped you and all the things in your world. I have come to complete your training. I am the Goddess Onrai, Queen of the Stars, Lady of the Land and Sea, your Maker and Mother. Here too are my brothers, the ineffable Cold Danda Sine and the incomprehensible Splendid Ap. We are the shapers of your future and have come to right a great wrong. The ones who have positioned themselves above you claim to be your benefactors, but they are afraid you will amass greater power than they and have held back from you much that you were meant to have! Bow to me and you shall be given far more than these paltry gifts your jealous overlords have sparingly apportioned out!"

This was strange speech, as such ideas were yet unknown amongst the races in the galaxy, but Tilotny succeeded in planting the seeds of suspicion. The offspring of the Firstborn began to question whether the Firstborn were holding things back from them, and even some amongst the Firstborn questioned whether the Celestials were holding things back from them. Yet many,

³ The world would later come to have an evil reputation, and was later renamed *Garn*, which meant "haunted," and there are those who say it still is.

especially of the Firstborn, regarded Tilotny's statements as the untruths that they were and felt dread in their hearts knowing that out of this calumny, great evil would arise.

This was but the first part of Tilotny's plan.

For their part, the Celestials strove to warn the galaxy, "Do not give in to fear of this Onrai, for she is a goddess of nothing. We are the true architects of this galaxy; do not be induced to serve her out of fear or lust of her secrets, for then we would be forced to depart from you, and this would grieve us, for you are our offspring and we are your loving guides, and obeisance we pay to the Eternal alone."

The Firstborn already had great endowments, so that most rejected her outright, but the Kwoth let their curiosity get the better of them, naively believing they had nothing to fear from knowledge alone. Knowledge, however, proved a powerful seductress, and it did not come free, first costing them their once intimate friendship with the Gree, who remained ever loyal to the Celestials. Yet, at the time, it seemed that all the Architects desired was to help them develop their Infinity Gates and spread them across the galaxy. "Why should the Gree alone be famous for their portals?" said Tilotny. "Are not the Kwoth designs as wondrous, even more so than the Gree?" They could see no reason not to develop and share their gifts, so they foolishly developed their Infinity Gates to be of cyclopean proportions, allowing enormous space vessels to pass through them, and in this they failed to realize until it was too late how their portals might be used.

Splendid Ap took Cold Danda Sine and Tilotny to the World Between Worlds, and there opened a window into the Primary Universe, and into this window, Tilotny peered.

"Laws prevent the crossing of dimensions, save by the Celestials," said Ap to Tilotny, explaining to her what is known as realm distinction.

"What is to prevent us crossing over?" asked Tilotny.

"I do not know," Splendid Ap responded.

"The gods, whom you call the Celestials, are at war in this realm," said Cold Danda Sine. "It is of great fascination, but I cannot yet discern the cause of their conflict."

"Are we not gods?" Tilotny asked.

"No, we are not," he replied. "We are something else."

"Then we shall be gods," promised Tilotny, "and our universe will bow before us..."

Tilotny tasked Splendid Ap to open a Transdimensional Gate, and into the Prime Universe they went, Ap to seek knowledge of old things, Cold Danda Sine to seek the new, Tilotny to seek the people of Ereth.

Splendid Ap learned that the Ereth held other secret doors to other dimensions. Cold Danda Sine learned of the Father of Shadows and those fallen Celestials that ruled there as gods. But this knowledge came at a price, and he was ever after changed. Tilotny learned that there were many amongst the thriving populace of those called humans who craved dominion, others who craved escape, and yet others who sought adventure amongst the stars. Most of this race were under a great beguilement and domination but did not even see it, while only a very few could perceive the larger cosmic conflict that had been going on around them for millennia. These she would avoid. But how utterly blind and foolish the rest were. They would prove easy to manipulate.

Little is known of their intercourse at this time, for they were far more circumspect in their dealings, fearing the reprisals of the celestial host who governed this realm. What is known is that many listened to the temptations of Tilotny's whispered promises of power, wealth, knowledge, and adventure, for she backed them up with smaller fulfillments, and so many believed they'd been chosen by a benevolent alien, deity, or messianic Maitreya. Splendid Ap created large ships that could fly through the heavens, and all those who accepted her offer left their homes and cities in these ships. Many came and brought with them livestock, pets, wildlife, plants, belongings, as well as the cultural, political, religious, historical, linguistic artifacts of their cities and countries to one of two new worlds situated in the eastern quarter of Skyriver's galactic disc.

With some help from the Architects, Tilotny would allow each civilization to develop. If one failed, she had the other. None of the exiles knew of the other world. One was called Cobal, and many regarded it as a paradise. The other was called Urthha, though many called it New Earth after the world they'd left behind, for, in fact, Splendid Ap had spherically designed it as a replica

of Erset.

Tilotny chose rulers for these worlds, and these had great constructions erected, pyramids and temples in honor of Onrai. Yet it was longing for the old world that marked the architecture and culture of the new, and with the advanced technology they'd been given, they could accomplish in hundreds of years what their ancestors had accomplished in thousands.

Both worlds succeeded in replicating the conditions they'd left behind, and it was not long before they found themselves divided into a dozen or so hostile nations with an ecology in collapse. Evil men took positions of authority in the form of governments and corporations, and much of the world fell to misery and woe, overpopulated and polluted, but technologically advanced so that a minority enjoyed the spoils of others' labors.

Tilotny watched and waited. She had no problem with the weak being ferreted out. So long as humans propagated, she was content. There was no need for her to foster militarism, for the domination system and its prevalent myth of redeeming violence carried over from the old world, to be perpetuated, celebrated, and expounded in the new.

With the ships that brought them there, humans could traverse their solar systems. After centuries of contaminating their own world, a great conflagration arose, and the nine kings of Cobal, known as the Ennead, sent their people offworld to colonize twelve new worlds in the Cyrannis system and one outside the star system entirely. This latter faction crossed into Urthha's system and settled on New Earth, where they identified themselves as the Alliance. The remaining twelve settled in their new homes for many long years, and were by and large united and content. This was not to last, and when they eventually took to the stars again, it would result in them coming into conflict with a nearby race of debased saurians known as the Sobekk.

Some years earlier, the Sobekk had listened to the strange voice of a dark one promising them godhood if they would create a robot army and transfer their life force into them. Though several later escaped this fate by fleeing their world, those who remained doomed themselves to mechanistic enslavement and were used by their domineering leaders as a means to hunt humans. The cybernetic army fought for near upon a millennium before destroying all but a fleeing remnant of human survivors, which for years after they hunted.

This genocide was not to Tilotny's liking, for she had other plans for the humans she'd brought to this realm, yet when she went to investigate she discovered that the Sobekk were under the oppression of a mysterious dark power. This entity spoke to Tilotny briefly, and although seemingly amused by her, he revealed little, save that she permitted to carry on since her stratagem was not so dissimilar from his own. So it was that she learned that there were other Celestials who had left their original estate. She pondered this development for a long time, for it occurred to her that there might come a day when their respective enemies had been subdued or destroyed that each would see the other as a threat, but at last she cast aside this troubling thought for a later time. The army of cybernetic beings had given her another idea, one that would greatly please Cold Danda Sine.

New Earth had not fared much better than Cobal, and it was no small irony that they had also fractioned into thirteen separate nations. When, at last, the Infinity Gate was installed there by the Kwoth, the situation changed so that any and all could travel to establish colonies in the neighboring solar system or across the galaxy to Notron. This was by design, and Tilotny ensured that they were unhindered and that it was perceived as a great boon to mankind.

What Tilotny did not know was that over the years the Celestials had secretly visited Cobal and Urthha and rallied those who were of like mind and could be taught, for Tilotny was not as clever as she'd envisioned herself, and many had come to see through her lies and secretly began following the teachings of those they called the Beings of Light. Splendid Ap was aware of this, but he did not share with his siblings all the secrets he knew.

Chapter 20: The Human Diaspora and the Battle of the Zhell and Taung

Tilotny had seen to it that the humans had grown strong and populous on Urthha before they were sent forth into the galaxy, knowing they would spread their pestilential ways far and wide. For this reason, too, she allowed them to despoil their world, as the poisoning of its air, water, and land would cause many to seek to depart it. Vast computer systems had taken over most aspects of society, and drugs were regularly employed to keep the populace pacified by the ruling oligarchy who enslaved them and regarded them as numbers, going so far as to enact a law that forced serial numbers upon citizens. This led to a wide-scale resistance movement under the leadership of two main groups, the Alliance, and the United Confederation of Zhell, the general who united the thirteen formerly divided nations on Urthha. A third group, calling themselves the Sons of Freedom, chose to eschew both groups and the dubious Infinity Gates that had been built there with the technology of the Kwoth.

Once the Star Temple housing the Infinity Gate was installed by the Kwoth, the Alliance would be transported to the first planet in the neighboring star system, which they initially named Terra, but which after their civil war later they would rename as they spread out to the Central Planets. The other group under the leadership of President Zhell was transported to Notron.

Due to the interference of the Celestials on Cobal and Urthha, many humans had come to revile Onrai and the Architects. Many of them made up the third resistance group, the Sons of Freedom, and they were not content to follow the Universal Alliance or Zhell, seeing in each of them debased leaders who sought power for their own sake. They were led by a slicer named Dale Hender, a pilot named Antonia Corellia, and her lover Paxton Solo. With the converted mining ship, the Oort Raider, the three managed to lead a group of five thousand resistance fighters on a journey to the closest system, which, based on the nomenclature from the old world, they called Alpha Centauri.

Their efforts did not escape the notice of Tilotny, who did not like to be defied, and she devised an opportunity to further sow chaos in the galaxy. She opened up a wormhole leading them to an uninhabited world (that would later be known as Corellia) near Notron. The appearance of the wormhole brought the attention of a slave ship crewed by Rodians and Gamorreans and led by Varlian Overlords from nearby Forhilynor. These soon captured the human exiles and brought them to their homeworld. The Vulagool—an insectoid race, who had joined the Architects and would go on to become bitter enemies of the Killiks—reached the height of their powers on Forhilynor. Called the Varlian Empire, they now began harvesting their slaves to build a giant stone temple, a distraction necessary to harvest the midichlorian energy of the slaves by means of a dark crystal that channeled that energy so the Varlian rulers could transport their world to the galactic core, from which they would rule as vassal kings under the Architects. Their plot was thwarted, however, by the Sons of Freedom, who would eventually depart Forhilynor for Corellia.

Tilotny had carefully cultivated Zhell and the leaders of the Alliance, for in her malign thoughts she knew that to achieve the despoliation of the galaxy she must disseminate those already adept in the despoliation of their own world. The so-called Alliance soon split into a fascist Eastern Alliance that fought against a coalition of Western forces. After both decimated the other, what arose was known as the Universal Alliance, and the parliament that ruled it began to extend its dominion to the stars.

Notron was an oceanic green planet with several large continents, not dissimilar from the original human planet as it had once been, and only sparsely populated by the native Taung, a proud and strong race who would not take kindly to the invaders. Tilotny was taking a risk sending humans there, for if the Taung petitioned the Celestials they would likely exile the humans, possibly even back to Eretz, but she was assured by the mysterious ruler of the Sobekk that that would not be the case.

President Zhell was aware that mankind had never before been truly united, so he instituted several laws to ensure his goal of unification. Unlike the Universal Alliance, which settled on two popular languages from the first world, Zhell designated a single language to be dominant amongst the humans. It was a decision that influenced the course of epochs. To Zhell's irritation, however, it came to be influenced in part by the language of Notron's indigenous Taung, as well as by early visitors from Duros and Bothawui.

Notron Cant became the Old Galactic Standard, and over millennia evolved into the Galactic Basic Standard, or Basic, as it spread throughout the Core worlds, disseminating unto a thousand and more alien vistas, who were fascinated by this new race

that seemed to have appeared from nowhere. The written alphabet Aurebesh (so named for its first two letters Aurek and Besh) had been developed, alongside the more formal logographic script, by the Firstborn, but was revitalized by the Wukkarian philologist Naicineoph.

The Infinity Gates were designed to send travelers anywhere in the galaxy that held another Star Temple, and the Kwoth were at this time busily erecting them across the galaxy at a rapid rate. While many were content to settle on Notron, others saw the Infinity Gate as an opportunity get away from neighbors or oppressors, or to erect kingdoms of their own. Zhell and his allies sought to prevent this, however, seeking to charge exorbitant fees that only the wealthy could afford. In this way did other Core Worlds come to be inhabited by humans at this time, such as Anaxes, Shawken, Metellos, and others. This was not to Tilotny's liking, however, and when Zhell defied her, he met with her disapproval and was disintegrated. Thus, did the Infinity Gate become open and free to all who would travel for any bold and ambitious humans who would seek a home farther from the Core. The successive presidents often fell foul of Tilotny's wrath, so that most did not even last out their terms.

Among the earliest to escape the authoritarianism of the Zhell Empire on Notron were the Second Sons of Freedom (named for the bravery of the first), and these came to infoliate the spheres with many to follow. Colonies were established on distant planets, where friendships and enmities were formed with the numerous races they encountered, and from ports on these other worlds, families and tribes could venture even further out through the Gree Hypergates, which were now ubiquitous throughout the galaxy.⁴ Humans were, thus, able to distance themselves as far as they could from their former kinsmen. Two clans even ventured as far off as the dwarf galaxy Companion Besh, nicknamed Firefist.

Zhell authorities exiled criminal elements off Notron to various designated worlds, such as Desevro in the far-off Tion Hegemony, where over many ages the surviving heirs would come to unite under the banner of Xim the Despot. Political dissidents and those looking to establish their own power base were encouraged to settle elsewhere, and colonizations began on Eriadu in the Outer Rim and other systems. And, in one of several ironies, a number of outspoken scientists and religious leaders were at one point cast out of Notron to the Seoul system, for their incessant warnings had become a nuisance to those in authority.

Although space and distance would preserve alive most of the inhabitants of the universe, the Celestials recognized that danger was on the horizon. While encouraging the dissemination of the various races and a cautious friendship with the humans who came to share their planets, they also warned: "Do not imitate the ways of the humans or fail to remember their danger, for although good exists in some, a curse lays upon them. Moreover, do not be induced to violence, for then we would be forced to depart from you and this would be grievous for all."

Only in the rarest of occasions were the Celestials' attempts to guide true peace and friendship successful, such as with the Daikini clan who came to Andowyne in the Kathol Rift.

As humans spread across the galaxy, so too spread the creatures that they had brought with them from their original homeworld so long ago, their domesticated animals, many of which they bred for food, and many of the wild ones which they hunted for sport. This was at first anathema to the Firstborn and their offspring, but as with all things, the debased ways of human culture would over time infest the inhabitants of the galaxy, who as they became more entangled with them over the years, forgot the warnings of the Celestials and embraced the ways of this provocative new people.

Some human branches changed physically over time as they adapted to new environments, others propagated with compatible humanoids, so that superficial, but unique genetic differences arose, giving rise to the near-human races, what then were called abhumans. From these two circumstances arose the Arkanian, Chiss, Zeltron, Mirialan, Firrerreo, Teevan, Ubese, Vultan, Lorrdian, Dantari, Ogemite, Ghostling, Sylphe, Umbaran, Pantoran, Ovoni, and numerous others. As sexual intermixing of many of the Firstborn races (and thus their offspring) had been intended by the Celestials, nonhuman races came to bring forth variations, as well.

As the generations passed, the humans of Notron tended to forget that they had come from another world (let alone a world before that). Though a measure of peace initially existed between the humans and the indigenous Taung on Notron, as time

⁴ Several surviving races who had served the Old Ones also made this region their home.

passed, the human population kept growing and spreading out, and larger and larger sections of Notron were remade into a lavish, sprawling likeness of the cities they had long before departed. As this ecumenopolis began to expand upon the once natural environs, the increasingly exasperated Taung began to see their world change in ways they did not approve of.

The human rulers spoke eloquent words of progress and change and took no stock of the wishes of their neighbors, who came to be thought of as inferiors and brutes. An ardent xenophobe like his late father, Zhell II changed the Taung name of Notron to the human name Coruscant to depict the glittering jewel that the young ecumenopolis had begun to resemble. In response, the Taung requested a treaty be signed, limiting the advancement of the humans to certain areas. Zhell had his barristers rework the document so that numerous loopholes and exigencies were inserted. The Taung were a wise race but they did not comprehend the tactics of deceit, inveiglement, or obfuscation, and so believed they had ensured a mutually beneficial resolution. They soon learned otherwise as urban crawl continued to spread onto their lands and territories, and in each case when they brought the matter to court, they were shown it was perfectly legal according to the treaty they'd signed. Attempts to rewrite the treaty were met with silence or hostility.

It was only a matter of time before the Battalions of Zhell would strike hard against the Taung, who had tried and failed numerous diplomatic attempts to reach a compromise, willing even to cede more lands if the treaty would but be reworked to allow a measure of equity. The presidential successors of Zhell had no love for the Taung, who by now were openly protesting human encroachment and environmental abuse, yet Presidents Praji, Shawken, and Lytton would not even so much as acknowledge the issues, with their propagandists labeling them as alien extremists in the minds of the public.

To silence the rising clamor of the Taung, as well as a growing number of humans who supported their claims, President Anaxes tasked the Fifth Battalion to use force to repel the Taung protesters, not realizing that the Taung at this time could not physically be harmed. Nevertheless, the assault accomplished its purpose. The Taung were aghast that the humans who they had allowed on their world would go so far as to try and kill them.

The Taung brooded and bitterly debated their next action. Determining that their words would continue unheeded, it was decided that the only thing the humans understood was destruction and that once they demonstrated this, the Zhell would withdraw and allow the Taung to live in peace within their originally agreed upon territories.

The Taung blew up the Royal Chambers of Zhell, and although they did so without causing harm to any sentients, President Anaxes framed it as a pretext for war. Secretly killing several military leaders of the 13th Battalion, men who had expressed misgivings about betraying the Taung, the president covertly placed their bodies within and without the destroyed building, ensuring they would be discovered and recorded. Blame was placed squarely on the Taung, and in a matter of days, the humans on Coruscant cried out for the extermination of the Taung monsters.

Rather than leave them in peace, as the Taung had believed, the Thirteen Battalions declared war on them. The battalions came into their territories, destroying their homes and sacred places. A fiercely proud people, it did not take much for the Taung to conclude that violence would be the only means of reclaiming their home from the teeming, pestilential humans. The Celestials pleaded with them not to pursue this course, offering to escort them through the Gree Hypergate, which had been constructed long ago in their territory, to a beautiful new home far from the humans on Coruscant, and repeated their warning and the consequences of not following them, yet most of the Taung would accept no such solution. Arasuum, an outspoken leader advocated for peace, but he was outvoted, and in the end, conceded to the wishes of the majority. They destroyed the Hypergate and severed their ties to their Celestial guardians, abandoning their once peaceful ways to become warriors, and in so doing, lost their immortality.

To replace their guardians and ensure their people would always fight the human horde, the Taung Council of Elders, led by Kad Ha'rangir, brought into being a priest class. Upon Ha'rangir's later death in battle, the priests reinvented him as a god of war for the Taung to worship. Thereafter, he was held up in the new "Canons of Honor" as the way towards growth and strength, whereas Arasuum was demonized into a sloth-god of stagnation.

The humans possessed too great an advantage in weaponry, numbers, and familiarity in the ways of violence. So it was with great reluctance that the Taung allowed the priests to call upon the Architects for aid. During a fierce battle between the Taung

leader Rexutu the Unconquerable and the Battalions of Zhell in the capital city of Great Zhell, Cold Danda Sine heeded the call, and caused the volcano upon which the humans had built their capital to erupt, devastating any and all who stood nearby.

So displeasing was this to Tilotny that she snatched victory from the hands of the Taung, who'd taken advantage of the chaos to nearly wipe out the Battalions of Zhell. Despite the ash that choked Coruscant's sky for two years, she reenergized Zhell's forces and brought them back from near extinction to achieve an unexpected and otherwise impossible victory. It was then that many of the Taung realized that the ways of Kad Ha'rangir were not the ways of strength and growth, but of needless suffering and destruction.

The irony did not escape them that in order to preserve their race they were now forced to abandon their beloved world after all. The Taung leadership, however, were determined to never be vulnerable again. Stealing ships from the human invaders they departed through the Infinity Gate to resettle on Roon. There, the first of many arguments arose as to whether they should have a sole ruler or a council. Although it was settled that they would maintain a council, the female sect of the priestly class forsook their political and religious ties and left for the Outer Rim to form their own group, who would later be known as the Warriors of Shadow.

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Political and ethical debates would continue amongst the Taung for millennia, until at last, years after the development of the hyperdrive, the desire for a sole ruler, a Mand'alor, as it is called in the Taung language, won out, and the council gave way for Mand'alor the First, who determined they must be conquerors. This move had been predicted long before by the Warriors of Shadow, who called it a grotesque imitation of human culture. In protest, many of the Taung left for other worlds, the first of which was Manda, which meant "self-rule," and they would not be associated with the later history of the Taung. The remaining Taung took to the stars on battles of conquest, with the Mand'alor settling on a new world christened Mandalore. There, after defeating the giant mythosaurs, which they fashioned into their sigil, they renamed themselves Mandalorians. Yet their ancient division between peacemaker and marauder, self-rule and authoritarian rule, would always follow them, and their historians knew it was due in part to the colonization and imperial policies of the wicked rulers who came to Notron long ago.

Chapter 21: The Ruination of Alashan at the Dawn of the Cosmic Wars

While most who used the Infinity Gate did so to visit new worlds or to live abroad in the galaxy, others used it for illicit purposes, such as to steal treasures from unsuspecting peoples. It was such a case that paved the way for the first terrible war that occurred shortly after the conflict of the Taung and Zhell.

A company of poachers and treasure hunters snuck unto Alashan in the Inner Rim where it was rumored that exotic creatures roamed in abundance and treasures lay about unguarded for the taking. The Alashanians were a trusting people, enchanted with the alluring beauty of the cities they'd created. The worlds of the Firstborn were all magnificent beyond compare, but the Alashanian cities were marvels even amongst these. Vices such as murder, theft, and greed were utterly foreign to their way of thinking.

When the Alashanians caught the human party hunting snow falcons and ranphyx, after having stolen bags of jewels and gems, they were shocked and aggrieved. The theft they could forgive; had the humans asked, they would have even gifted them such and more. But the former they could not forgive, and so they sent them back through the Infinity Gate, after which they destroyed the Star Chamber that the Kwoth had constructed there. There was little the human marauders could do to resist the Alashan, and they were forced to return empty-handed and resentful.

The hunting party had been made up of members of the military and ruling elite, and they began to spread a tale of the vicious Alashanians, alien monsters who tried to murder them and who might at any moment come to destroy the human race. This was said only as a means of saving face, but their stories spread and unreasoning fear took hold on the hearts and minds of the populace when it was reported. It might still have ended there, but for the intervention of Tilotny, who saw a new way to corrupt the minds and hearts of the galaxy.

Of all the evil commands that Splendid Ap had carried out for Tilotny, this was the one he most regretted. It was not a difficult assignment to carry out. A small thing really. Just a tweak. But it allowed the Infinity Gate to send a wave of destructive energy across the cosmos to the target of its choice.

When President Phard was informed of it, he didn't hesitate, and although it was pointed out that this was an act of unprovoked aggression, he couched it as a necessary preemptive strike. Some opposed it, but not enough to stop it. The president declared that it was important to send a message about "defending our way of life and values," but he mainly wanted to show the galaxy that Coruscant would not be cowed by any who might think to harm them. For others, it was an exciting test of their new technological prowess.

The Alashanians were utterly unaware of the coming danger, assuming that the boasts of the human invaders were just that. Besides this, the Firstborn and their offspring were under direct protection from death and harm, conditional on each race's faithfulness to the principles of love, wisdom, justice, and the balance of power handed down from the Supreme Maker and passed on to them from their Celestial guides. If any violated these precepts, the Celestials would be forced to depart as they had the Taung, and they would be left to their own devices.

Puissant waves of destructive geothermal energy shot across space to Alashan. In one engulfing flash of enveloping incandescence, everything was shattered: the crystalline cities of Xo'thiqq, where on the eve of the vernal equinox the jeweled heads of Lamon-Zonne would frolic; the climbing, diaphanous spires of Imnodell and Agnaaro-Dweb that sang to the stars the etudes of Yontarion in counterpoint rhythm; the citadels of dream in the pleasure gardens of Zykkarph and Maiyal, where tourists came to see the LoFai transmogrified, all these and more, the wonders of Alashan renowned throughout the galaxy were forever pulverized into dust.

The Alashanians themselves were safe from harm, as a powerful shield of protective energy surrounded each and every citizen, up to and including the living creatures they shared their planet with. But all else, their treasured domiciles and architectural wonders became as ash.

The warnings of the Celestials—to resist giving into fear and the temptations of Onrai—were, after this abandoned by the

Alashanians and others. Splendid Ap had again been tasked to open the hyper-windows so that the rest of the galaxy could stand witness to the destruction of Alashan's once-wondrous cities and tremble at the maleficence of man.

In unreasoning fury and bitterness, the Alashanians removed their High Council and began the construction of weapons of defense and attack, spending the following decades in underground isolation, erecting vast and impregnable walled cities of technological marvel. No more would artifacts of pure splendor be crafted on Alashan. Casting off their Celestial guardians, the god of fortresses became their idol.

Tilotny again addressed the inhabited worlds, saying, "Children of the galaxy, I, the Goddess Onrai, Queen of the Stars and Architect of all things, have returned to see that many of you still do not believe me. Perhaps you need proof of your mother's claims. It is said that a shadow had fallen upon the humans from the Supreme Maker, and yet they roam about as gods, traversing the galaxy as if it is theirs. Yet, those who call themselves your guardians and masters will not give you the means to defend yourselves. But I am not miserly like they. Bow before me and I shall provide you the weapons you need to protect your lands from these and other strange and powerful entities who lurk in wait outside your worlds. Tell your elders to go to the Star Temples of the Kwoth, which can be found on each of your worlds. Offer up a sacrifice of blood, as a show of good faith, and one of my emissaries will come to give you the protection you so desperately need to live in peace."

At Tilotny's words, many grew fearful, and it was concluded that the humans were a malignant force that brought calamity wherever they went. Yet here they were traversing the spheres, settling upon any planet of their choosing as if they were masters of the stars, razing ancient civilizations to dust, and suffering no consequence for it. Much hatred of mankind was fostered on this day. Yet, many were also anxious about these strange entities she'd spoken of, for they had heard of no such thing until now.

Tilotny had long plotted her ascension in the galaxy and knew the humans alone would not be enough to accomplish her goals. As populous as they had become, it would be aeons before they could prove to be a real threat to most in the galaxy. She did not have the luxury of time, as Cold Danda Sine was growing ever more intractable and difficult to deal with. The final part of Tilotny's plan to win the galaxy to her ways was through terror of a force that could not be defeated. That force would be comprised of her offspring, who would be sent forth with vast armies at their backs to exact retribution for all who refused to accept the new order in the galaxy.

The Celestials called out again, saying "Pay no heed to she who calls herself Queen of the Stars, for she is no god, but a deceiver in darkness. We are the only true architects of this empyrean domain and have made no claim on you as subjects, save that you treat with one another in peace and love. Justice will come for those who bring terror. Continue to do so and no harm can befall you or those you love, neither from the false architects nor from anything they might call forth."

Yet, it was not long before Alashan took its revenge. From within their subterranean walled cities, which could withstand the destructive blast of a supernova, they fired a superweapon of their own devising. The Infinity Gate on Coruscant was targeted and set ablaze, along with the entire metropolitan area of the new capital (then known as Cormond after their current president) that housed the Star Temple. Blackened canyons came to be in place of city squares, and once again stygian clouds took the place of blue skies. Tens of thousands were melted into dust and glass in the wake of the electric funeral Alashan had sent forth, while the ruling elite and military infrastructure of Zhell, who lived in the legislative district, were shattered. Yet, in the vengeance of Alashan, what was mainly accomplished was the murder of innocents and the spread of the pestilence of war. The windows of Ap opened to show what had occurred, and fear again spread.

In the galaxy at large, the destruction of the Alashan cities and their retaliation did exactly as Tilotny had hoped, as fear became the catalyst for anger. With no perceived end to the plunderers' dissemination across the stars, the fearful offspring of the Firstborn, concerned that their cities and homes would become like those on Alashan, demanded that the Celestials either give them weapons as a means to defend themselves or began developing them themselves. The Celestials would not provide implements of violence, nor would they sanction the creation of them, reminding them of what they'd earlier stated and promised. But many chafed at this, seeing only the effrontery of the evil marauders. To this end, the offspring of the Firstborn, and even some of the Firstborn themselves, turned aside from the traditions of the Celestials and constructed for themselves the weapons which the Celestials denied them.

For their part, the Kwoth were dismayed to see their device put to such use, and they were regarded as enemies by many in the galaxy at that time. In shame, they renamed themselves the Kwa, and determined to somehow make amends. Yet, they also tweaked the Infinity Gates on their worlds so that they too could be utilized as weapons. Should anyone attempt to bring harm to their world, they would be met with a bitter end.

The survivors on Coruscant came to believe they'd been betrayed by the gods, and without the Infinity Gate or the Gree Hypergate they were forced to remain on their world. The diaspora from Coruscant had come to its end. Not until the aftermath of the War of Temporal Planes would they leave their planet again, and for long aeons they would look to the stars in fear and think of the hubris of man.

The children of the Firstborn were easier to entice. By means of artifacts, talismans, jewels, and exotic or dangerous beasts to guard these treasures, a multitude of civilizations bowed to the false Architects, severing the bond between them and the Firstborn who shaped them. So, it was that Tilotny's plot came to fruition and many went to the Star Temples and offered blood sacrifices as she had instructed. In a climate of resentment and shame, the galaxy became further fragmented, and enmity now existed where once only friendship reigned.

Across the galaxy, worlds became independent states, proclaiming their individual sovereignty. But always there was a price to pay. Tilotny saw to it that their languages were changed so that they could no longer communicate with any race besides their own. This was something the Architects presented to them as a mark of racial pride, but it was covertly intended to create division and so that information could not so easily spread. Cold Danda Sine took delight in altering the nature of each of their planets in innumerable ways. Lifeforms were reshaped, transformed into a predator and prey paradigm; other races were brought in; food and resources became scarce, and as the nations sought to rule themselves in place of their lost guides, the overall quality of life was diminished rather than improved, but by the time that was discerned it was too late to turn back.

Chapter 22: Dimension of Darkness

Shortly after they'd first arrived, Tilotny, Splendid Ap and Cold Danda Sine created a hidden realm within and beyond the galaxy in which they would not easily be discovered. It was the dimension later referred to as Otherspace. Though some came to call it Muspilli, the "realm of fire," and others the "Anti-Force," it was named in that long forgotten language Illathurion, which meant Veiled Fortress. Beyond the reach of realspace and the walls of hyperspace, and occluded by powerful spells, dark Illathurion was an inverted galaxy of strangely colored suns strewn amidst a charcoal and crimson firmament. There, Cold Danda Sine had envisioned contumacious new things to excite him, so that it became over time an even weirder and more hideous domain forged in mockery of the galaxy. There they schemed dark ideas of their own devising, and many who had pledged allegiance to Onrai found themselves prisoners for Cold Danda Sine to experiment upon.

The exotic dragon-race of the Duinuogwuin had been considered the most powerful of the Firstborn and although not in great numbers, the Star Dragons were far more populous than they are today. Tilotny recognized them as a threat and presented her cognate with the challenge of eliminating that threat. Cold Danda Sine could not directly remove them, but that had never been his interest anyway. He had earlier enticed the Basiliskans, offspring of the Duinuogwuin, to become warriors and defenders of the galaxy from the rampaging humans. Now, he changed their forms so that they would not be familiar to the Star Dragons.

One day, the Duinuogwuin were visited by a mysterious new dragon race. These were the transformed Basiliskans, who were much larger in those days. They were seen as beautiful in the eyes of the Star Dragons, though some warned that this strange race should be avoided. Yet, a friendship developed and a large number of Duinuogwuin were seduced into copulating with them, believing this would add greater beauty to their line and increase their numbers. The Star Dragons came to rue that decision. Forever after, many of their offspring would emerge as violent or damaged. While yet a few would prove amenable to the benevolent ways of the Star Dragons, such as the Kadri'Ra, the Sea Dragons of Drexel II, the Panna Dragons, and the Arkanian Dragons, the majority were pertinaciously fierce and uncontrollably aggressive. These include the Krayt and Kell Dragons, the Chiaki, Dragonsnakes, War-Dragons, Mythosaurs, Mantigrues (known also as Devil Beasts), Condor Dragons, Spine Dragons, Menagerie Dragons, Ubese Thorn-Back War Dragons, and Howlers.

In the Empyrean Wars that followed, the Basiliskans reemerged on the side of the Architects with many of their brood in tow, an army of brutal enemies instigating a vicious battle between them. The Star Dragons emerged the sodden victor, having been seduced a second time, this time into violence against their offspring and those they'd once loved. The Duinuogwuin fled into the galaxy and kept themselves scarce after the War of Temporal Planes, determined to never again fall prey to their passions and the vicissitudes of the galaxy.

The occult science of Sine knew no bounds. The Basiliskans were but the first of his reshaped and re-engineered races to have come from the ashen vastness of dark Illathurion. In mockery of the Celestials and their Firstborn, Cold Danda Sine used science and magic, genetics and indoctrination to design and breed violent new races that were fundamentally altered in temperament and form from the many victims that he'd abducted in secret over the long years. It has been said that of the Architects' vituperate designs this was the cruelest.

Recalling the cybernetic army of the Sobekk, Cold Danda Sine sought to add a unique addition to his collection, and went further, tasking Splendid Ap to design self-replicating droid constructs, into which Cold Danda Sine summoned forth dark entities to inhabit. In this way did the hate-filled Abominor come to be. The devious constructs grew in number, as well as personal stature, adding bits and pieces to themselves until they became a truly fearful sight to behold.

Other malefic experiments of Cold Danda Sine include creating a disease on Forhilnor that infected the larvae of the Varlian, who came to his amused attention when that officious race determined to become masters of the galaxy. From their stunted larvae he engineered the Hutts, the Yahk-Tosh, the Quockrans, and the Orooturoo. The duplicitous Ssi-Ruuk were genetically altered from the guileless P'w'ecks; the vampiric Anzati from an isolationist human colony on Anzat; the violent Vagaari from the innocent Geroons; the T'surr, the Dashade, the Zanibar, the Esh-Kha, the Ng'ok war beasts, the Kintan Strider, and myriad

predatory sapient and sentient forms, including those anomalies which were more subtle and hard to detect, such as the entity living in so-called Plaque of Victory, which came to Aaris III.

He did not do this for Tilotny, for he cared nothing for her strategies, or whether or not these new beings would serve her goals. The experiments themselves were all that concerned him, their bizarre forms and behaviors all that entertained him. Failed experiments were sent to populate worlds in dark Illathurion to serve a later purpose. The successes were made strong and Tilotny unleashed them upon unsuspecting worlds. Sine might have stopped her, but he was fascinated by seeing them in action, as if it was all a grand game of Dejarik.

Not all bred in dark Illathurion became cruel—for not even Cold Danda Sine could remove a being's free-will. Nonetheless, cruelty bred all, and many were designed merely in jest by his strange, alien whims. Thus, the Swokes Swokes came about and the illusion-casting Droxine, who were a favorite of his. And some Cold Danda Sine kept for himself, for he wished to seed the worlds of dark Illathurion, and the especially bizarre and demoniac races were allowed to grow and thrive there.

Cold Danda Sine was not alone in conducting such iniquitous tests. Several races who had chosen to join with them were engaged in their own experiments. This included the offspring race of the noble Krevaaiki, who had created them as a means of honoring the human race when first they were introduced to Notron. So adept had this race become at bioengineering new life, the Krevaaiki called them "little Osserians," or Ossians, and they thrived on their homeworld of Mala. After Notron had destroyed the Alashan capital, the Ossians forsook the Krevaaiki, believing that because of their abilities they were superior to all others. While yet wearing Krevaaiki ceremonial armor, they renounced the Celestials and renamed themselves the Malak. Although they did not join the Architects, their turn to darkness was a blow to the Krevaaik, as it was to all the Firstborn who lost their beloved offspring, but the Malak were a dangerous race, not only advanced designers but excellent pilots.

Not unlike Tilotny and the Rakata, who took credit for things they had no part in, the Malak claimed to be the Engineers of the Human Race, a claim believed by some due to the mysterious appearance of humans on places like Notron, Cobal, Terra, Forhilnor, Lundinium, and others. The Malak went about re-terraforming numerous worlds to reflect their black and capricious minds and were it not for the impediment of the Krevaaiki, they would have caused much greater harm.

Although they came into conflict with some of the human remnant on New Earth, as well as with the E'Yautja, another arrogant race of hunters, the destruction of the Malak came at the jaws of an aggressive endoparasitoid species with a protective exoskeleton and hive mind that they themselves engineered (and which a human replica model later re-engineered). Its giant empresses were able to survive for millennia, laying thousands of eggs, which gestated through the host bodies of victims of nearly any sentient race. Queens could even influence potential hosts through dreams and nightmares, while telepathically directing their offspring, guardians, warriors and drones. So did the Malak bring about their own end.

Perhaps the pinnacle of Cold Danda Sine's sorcerous engineering was the shapeshifters, and these Tilotny kept hidden, purposing them for infiltration, surveillance, and sabotage. While the Gurlanin, Felacatian, Polydroxol, Pulra, and Gupin were Children of the Firstborn, the Filar-Nitzan, Shi'ido, Homanan and Croke hailed from the impenetrable mind of Cold Danda Sine, as did the Proteans, Quarf, and the polymorphic ancestor of the Dazouri and Lahsbee. But in this scheme Tilotny was unsuccessful. The shapeshifters and polymorphs proved as adept at dissimulating their thoughts and words as they were their forms. Fiercely independent, many were not cruel and did not lust after power, determining to be ruled by none but themselves. It is believed they were aided in this by Cold Danda Sine, who admired any who proved independent or stood up to them, and he secretly took pleasure in doing anything that might thwart Tilotny's grand designs. Their ability to disguise their forms kept them from her reprisals, allowing them to scatter throughout the galaxy.

Amongst the shapeshifters, it was only the Acaleph, known now as the Mikan, who remained loyal to Tilotny, and these were sent to the Outer Rim in disguise as exotic and beautiful near-humans to lure and destroy those who had chosen the wrong side.

Yet the most loyal to Tilotny—and among the most rapacious—were the Rakata. Bred from Ongree abducted from Skustell and Gungans captured on Lehon, the Rakata (meaning "those who strike") were reared to be rigidly hierarchical, cannibalistic, and intelligent. They took over Lehon from the Gungans, who were able to flee due to the aid given them by the Kumumgah, to Naboo, where they established underwater colonies.

Yet, there were still many who resisted the inducements of the Goddess Onrai, so into the galaxy at this time came the Old Ones and the start of the Empyrean Wars, the first of what is now known as the Cosmic Wars.

Chapter 23: Spawn of the Architects

The idea of producing his own offspring had occurred to Cold Danda Sine as something new and exciting, and in secret, he brought one forth. A lover of incongruity, Sine's offspring was designed to be the diametric opposite of him. The antipodal being that came forth was a sphere-shaped planetoid outwardly similar to Cold Danda Sine, but unlike him in every other way. Where Cold Danda Sine resembled a blackened world of fiery lava-flows, his offspring was lustrous and green with life. Whereas Cold Danda Sine was now indifferent and emotionally unresponsive to anything but his own whims, for which he was ever restless and impatient, his offspring was compassionate towards life with a serene, philosophical disposition.

The two looked upon each other with intimate knowledge of what each was, and though he displayed ambivalence and antipathy towards him, his offspring could discern the love and curiosity that dwelt for but a moment in the otherwise frozen heart of his parent.

"What do you call me?" asked the offspring.

"Nobbyla," (which means "accursed spawn"), Cold Danda Sine responded with a cold laugh.

"In an earlier tongue that meant noble, an appropriate name for I am the most benevolent being you have ever fashioned. Nevertheless, I will call myself Aerimus, for I am to be the cradle of life."

"That does not concern me," Sine said with the hint of a mysterious sadness.

"I am saddened for you," said Aerimus, though he mistook his sire's grief, not realizing he'd glimpsed what might come to pass, "but grateful for the life you've given me. I fear our mutual incompatibility tells me we must part."

But Cold Danda Sine had already turned away, whether lost in the devising of new and recondite schemes, or stricken by the realization of the cycle of perpetual abandonment that had plagued his bizarre life. Aerimus did not take offense, as he was wise enough to know his sire was broken in a way that he could not heal, but not discerning enough to recognize the cause of his brokenness.

Aerimus had caused Sine to become reflective, and he saw now how he'd become the very thing he once detested, a dull, old, tasteless trickster. This feeling of shame, at least, was a new emotion for him, and the return of his grief was powerful and nuanced, and he inwardly reveled in it, even as he requested Splendid Ap to transport Aerimus from dark Illathurion to an uninhabited region in one of the dwarf galaxies.

In this, Ap knew he was seeking to protect him from the war to come, but Aerimus would not escape the sorrowful vision Cold Danda Sine had seen. In the millennia ahead he would meet with a race of beings who had traveled far to Companion Cresh in order to escape from their galactic wars. Aerimus had grown lonely over the years and was eager to have people with whom he could share his world. These beings renamed him in their own tongue, and together they fled to the further dwarf galaxies... but unbeknownst to them there they would only find another war between the Abominor of dark Illathurion and the Silentium. Caught in the middle, the inhabitants of Aerimus were forever scarred. Contaminated by the effects of violent conflict, the inhabitants of Aerimus turned against each other, and in the raging abomination that was the Cremlevien War, they killed Aerimus. It was this that Cold Danda Sine had seen, and which had caused him such grief, for it was he who had brought the Abominor into being, who set off the very conditions that would lead to his offspring's tragic demise.

Yet, in the passing of Aerimus, the sapient planet was able to bring to birth a seed into which his love and soul passed, and which in time grew into a mighty planet. But so grievous was the sin of his people in having murdered Aerimus that the midichlorians did something unusual and fled from their murderous hosts, who were thereafter stripped of the Force. Thus, were the Yuuzhan Vong born.

It is no small irony that in the years to come they would enslave another militaristic race, the Sobekk remnant, who were renamed the Cas-rach, the "devious hunting dogs," later known as the Chazrach. The Sobekk who had fled their world had not changed their ways. Besides the group who became enslaved to the Vong, the other fought a fierce battle with the Ereesi and lost, leaving those who remained to flee to the Valtaullu Rift in the Unknown Regions, where, in their madness, they constructed a

titanic temple in honor of their fallen hero and king, the Lord Ravager Korman Lao, and were ever after known as the Kanzer Exiles.

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Tilotny called Cold Danda Sine into her presence and told him to inseminate her, for she sought to produce offspring of her own. From their seed, she foretold, would come the Great Race! But Cold Danda Sine had already given form to a great offspring and had no further interest in repeating that, especially with Tilotny for whom he held nothing but contempt. Yet, he kept his own counsel, and for this one purpose, he agreed: that he should see her ultimate degradation!

So it was that Tilotny became fecund for the first time and the seeds that swelled within her would come haunt the galaxy for ages to come. The first of Tilotny's offspring was a hideous thing the galaxy had never before seen, a tentacled grotesquery with a pulpy head, like a monstrous squid from the occluded deeps, with membranous wings that drew forth from the dripping, bloated sack that was its body. Yet it was his face that caused Tilotny to shudder and seek to kill it, for it held a countenance of such unwavering malevolence that to look upon it for any length of time would be to lose oneself in madness. Cold Danda Sine laughed and stayed her hand.

Whatever abhorrent name Tilotny had given him is not known, but Cold Danda Sine gave him the title Typhojem, which has come down to us in archaic Mimban as The Great Priest. Tilotny cruelly despised him, for she hated all things that were not of great beauty, though she was jealous of all that were. True to Cold Danda Sine's plan, Typhojem spurned its mother, referring to her in its own blasphemous tongue as "the great whore," and came to have affection for Cold Danda Sine alone, for he discerned that they were similar in their antipathy of her. Upon learning from him of the old world he'd visited, and the things he saw there, he took the appellation Father of Shadows upon himself, for he determined to spread his shadow upon the inhabited planets of the galaxy.

The second to come forth was a nebulous form, like an insect with a thousand legs that reached out with its creeping webs into space. Gorog she was later called, though at her heaving birth, Sine uttered the name Tharagorrogaraht—which meant 'Blasphemous herald of the perpetual night' and this is a name that endured as the Herald of the Night Spirit—for she was a creature much like her mother in that she sought to be a goddess.

Upon discerning that she would receive no love from those that spawned her, Tharagorrogaraht's first act was to bring forth from the offal of the worlds below a myriad of fluttering and creeping things to follow and praise her. In later times, Tharagorrogaraht strove to become goddess of all the insect races, to turn them against the lesser beings of the galaxy. Yet it was the Killiks from whom she most sought worship, for they were of the Firstborn and possessed the power to create technological wonders, but only one nest of the Killiks ever deigned to revere her, and to the others, she remained a symbol of pestilential darkness. It is said that a symbolic and hidden Gorog cult persists to this day.

The third to come forth was the vampiric Ooradryl, a sentient blob of oozing, morphing flesh that hovered in space hungering for the energy and life-force of living things. Vulnerable in its naked form, it requested wrappings, for which reason Splendid Ap gave to it golden scales made to cover the fleshy parts of the creature all around so that it resembled a gilded floating cube. Tilotny secretly feared this one, for she knew that in its hunger it would seek to devour all that lived and breathed, including her.

Yet, the fourth and final was perhaps the worst, a grey ooze that poured violently out of Tilotny and formed into a bubbling pool. When Tilotny looked upon it, a face rose out to meet her. It was her face at first, but then it opened into a hideous grin that burst forth a bubbling, crimson mass of entrails, organs, and eyes. Cold Danda Sine laughed and called the creature Mnggal-Mnggal.

Shaping for itself an eyeless, noseless head with a large protruding mouth, it grew wings where ears would be and floated up out of the ooze to Tilotny's height, where it croaked: "Not so beautiful on the inside, Mother, if that is who you are. Hear now our liturgy, for the hierophant has fashioned it for you, and Ap will ring the sistra:

Elevatio ululate

Tilotny cum illa miseratione animae maculosus

Tilotny oratio eius magister, Mordiggian

Tilotny loquatur ad apis nevoota

Instructiones pro sepultura eius

Tilotny exprobrare aurora

Tilotny exprobrat solis

An oratio ad umbras Bedlam

Tilotny confundar⁵

“Your poetry is grotesque, like you,” she replied.

The grey viscous liquid below now reached up and attached itself to the speaking head of Mnggal-Mnggal, transforming itself into the ideal of the nude human male form. “Does it sound more lovely if I read it to you like this? I can be anything to anyone, but in the end, I will always be Death.”

When she didn’t respond, the creature gradually turned the body old and decayed it until it was a skeletal frame, with pieces of faux-human flesh and entrails falling off. From the pile of dusty bones a thing rose up on eighteen legs, with eighteen blinking eyes and eighteen tentacles, and a mouth full of spikey prongs: “You are but the arbiter of taste. I can translate it for you into even older languages if you’d like. Would you understand if I did? If I asked you, ‘min ainee atra tiyet?’ how would you respond, goddess? If I said ‘hetep hena ten,’ would you know I was being facetious, o maker of mine? Surely, if you were the true mother of all, you would know this: ‘r’ëh änokhiy notën lif’nëykhëm haYôm B’räkhäh ûq’läläh,’ for I am that ancient malediction brought forth to bring to an utter end these fallen, lamentable spheres, and all who dwell upon them.”

“I’ve no time for riddles,” Tilotny snorted dismissively. “I can make use of your other talents, however.”

“You refer to my particular capabilities,” the creature sibilated darkly. “Like my names, they are many. Do you know why they call me Mnggal-Mnggal?”

“More riddles! It is in mockery of your uncle, him of which we do not speak.”

“Had not the superlative Horliss-Horliss departed from your wicked side, I don’t suppose I would have come to be in your world. Sine knows, and he’s a tricky one. Horliss is a play on words: outside salvation. Does he bring salvation from without? Or does he stand outside salvation? Or is it both? My name is a kind of corruption—fitting—for it means unrestrained growth, and that is what I am...” As Mnggal-Mnggal said this, its body grew and distended into bizarre shapes and proportions until it seemed that all the sky around them was Mnggal-Mnggal. “It portends one who feeds without measure,” the entity’s voice echoed from all around, “a devourer whose appetite is never sated. Am I not this? Will I not swallow up you and my hoary siblings as delicacies before the grand feast of all the blood-drenched worlds in all the blood-drenched universe until there is naught else but Mnggal-Mnggal? And then shall I have none left to devour but myself as another who did as such, eating his own tail, endlessly. For that is the way of the worlds...” The amorphous body of the creature narrowed into that of a dragon eating its tail, and then a spinning circle of blood and flesh.

“Enough!” Tilotny railed. “Are you my servant or are you like the rest here?”

Mnggal-Mnggal expanded into the form of eighteen giant serpents with noctilucous eyes who surrounded her. Each hissed in unison with one voice: “Death does not serve, but rules as king to all who will be food for the worms. Did you not comprehend my poem?”

Tilotny dismissed them. She would have let her brood starve to death, but Cold Danda Sine gave to them food from the stock

5 Raising the Alarm

Tilotny Commiserates with Her Stained Soul

Tilotny Addresses Her Master Mnggal-Mnggal

Tilotny Speaks to a nevoota bee

Instructions for her Burial

Tilotny Reproaches the Dawn

Tilotny Reproaches the Sun

An Address to the Bedlam Spirits

Tilotny Confounded

of failed experiments that now multiplied on the planets of dark Illathurion. "These are not my offspring," Tilotny accused Cold Danda Sine, who only laughed cruelly. So she turned on Splendid Ap: "You had a hand in this. You brought forth these abominations from elsewhere!"

"To perambulate the copious dimensional variances is no great task for one such as me," said Splendid Ap, "nor to embrue with xenogenetic material the fecund lacuna of your womb."

"It matters not from whence they came," said Tilotny. "They shall serve my aims or be unmade." Then addressing her offspring, she said: "Foul spawn of the deep void; brood of the blackest gulfs, you have been brought forth into this realm with a purpose. Go forth then, conquer and destroy all who will not serve me."

In the black-lit gulfs of dark Illathurion, the hell-spawn of the Architects fed where they could, terrifying the fantastic beings of that twilight realm, but after that, they raised up wicked kings, dark priests, and stygian armies from amongst them.

Then they summoned up nightmares of their own.

Tharagorrogaraht brought forth the horrid sultans which came to be her familiars, the roaring Wizards of the Night Spirit, and in their clicking, wheezing language, they called up the swarming nyctocrys, pestilential arthropods who fed on ichor, and other insectoid races who were brought to worship before her, and from these had the deadly nevoota bee first been hatched.

The vainest of the four was Ooradryl, who made replicates of himself, smaller versions that would grow into weird forms as they fed. Of these, the ghastly Waru is the most famous, and his cult practices in shadow to this day. The Brood of Ooradryl would follow him in a train of horrors throughout the benighted galaxy, or go off on their own to devour sacrificial victims left for them on the malignant, teeming worlds of Oozultharoum, miasmal Pnygatheem, spectral Xanthiir, or the charnel pits of Mezzallmech.

From dark Illathurion, Typhojem sought to continue the experiments of Cold Danda Sine and engineered the Yevetha, who he settled on Xoth (later known as New Zoth, or N'Zoth) in the Koornacht Cluster of the Deep Core, for this world held a mysterious attraction for him. He fostered the earliest dark side cults to dominate the humans for he held a special hatred for them, never forgetting that his mother wore a human shape and tried to murder him. He was worshipped amongst the Ghathonothoa, a floating cephalopod race, who in their early days could petrify their opponents with but their stare.⁶

Perhaps amongst the most terrifying entities Typhojem called forth were the Shadow-Beings, demoniac pedumbrations who passed beyond the dimensional borders. They would not serve Typhojem, nor any in dark Illathurion, but only the true Father of Shadows, whose voice they hear and obey in their umber, cryptic minds.

Besides these, other grotesques and abominations crept into the universe at this time, the horrid Xanxathotep who presides at the Temple of Shadows in the frozen reaches of dim Yumar; the three-headed Taknaath, giant guardians of the vast and dismal chambers in the Citadel of Cykranor; the faceless and slippery Athla'giroth, known as the Eater of Stars and Destroyer of Worlds, now imprisoned on frozen Plawal; the ghastly and esurient Void Horror, rolling and flapping alone in the black aether; fearsome Lotek'k, the Terror from Beyond, who served naught but Typhojem, and others too foul to enumerate.

Otherspace swelled into a phantasmagoric realm of etiolated worlds and cyclopean cities, wherein lurked the extravagant, animate experiments of Cold Danda Sine, his most surreal and feculent inhabitants who paid diabolical obeisance to eldritch kings and the feline godspawn of the accursed Architects. In millennia to come, the High Shaman of the Order of the Terrible Glare, Rur, would refer to the various lesser creatures of this realm collectively as the Rozzum.

Splendid Ap tore open several transdimensional gates, the Demonsgate in the Kathol Rift, the Endor Gate, the Khadaji Singularity in the Corridan sector, the Tyus Cluster in the Mid Rim, the Moshaw Dark Star in the Sesswenna sector, the Black Hole of Quintas, and others, from which the Old Ones and their armies came through! The Hutts were sent to Varl and its moons, the Ssi-Ruuk to Lwhekk, the Anzati to Anzat, the Blood Spites to Tython, the K'aargs to Shira, and numerous others to dominate or decimate worlds. Some were sent to numerous worlds, such as the fear-inspiring Ssither, who successfully crushed the inhabited worlds the Demophon system, and settled on Jatee, unaware that in the midst of their conquest, one of their weapons destabilized their sun, a cost they would pay in years to come.

Mnggal-Mnggal had no need for offspring, for he could spread himself across entire star-systems if he so chose. What he

6 Their numbers and powers diminished in the wars, after which they renamed themselves the J'feh to disguise their ancestry in the dark bowels of Otherspace.

could not do, unlike his siblings, was cross the stars. In this, he was like the spawn of the Old Ones, who required a gate to depart their domain, and for this reason, he approached Splendid Ap in secret. "O Radiant Apothem, before you depart from us—for I know the hidden things of your mind just as you know mine—open a passage for me to a densely populated world in the galaxy where I may begin my feast, and do not judge, for as it is with the sybaritic human race, it is my nature to engulf and consume without thought to those lesser ones that I devour."

But Splendid Ap, who had up until now had followed the leading of Tilotny and Cold Danda Sine, had learned all that he'd needed to learn under the direction of his cognates, and something resounded deep within him that he'd long clamped down on. So he sent Mnggal-Mnggal to an uninhabited world, later known as Mugg Fallow, where the entity would have to content himself on grass, rocks, insects, and trees until he could find a means offworld... or visitors came to him.

For long years Mnggal-Mnggal was unknown to those who would otherwise have served him, that is, until the brutal Viis Empire—against all good judgement—sought to use their jump gates to explore that world and enslave all upon it. Their arrogance and foolishness saw the reptilian Viis Empire and culture destroyed, and the Abiru—their nine slave races—freed. The galaxy, however, was spared the release of Mnggal-Mnggal due to the wisdom and action of several of the former slaves.

"Vain Goddess," intoned Cold Danda Sine, "Blind and Stupid Tilotny. Our games are at an end, for I have long grown weary of you, Bringer of Chaos, Destroyer of Light, self-serving Queen of Air and Darkness. Until now, you and I have been the vilest creatures in the galaxy. Yet, now have gone forth some even more caliginous than we, who have been brought from the dark veil without, in through the revolting darkness within you. I no longer wish to play this, for it is paltry and stale. Depart from my realm before I command my offspring to tear you asunder."

Her humiliation complete, Tilotny vowed eternal hatred upon them and departed from her siblings forever. This pleased Cold Danda Sine so greatly it is said the echo of his cachinnation rang out to the galaxy beyond, and worlds trembled!

Chapter 24: The Empyrean Wars

The shroud of dark Illathurion spread out upon spectral wings to suffocate the galaxy in the Empyrean Wars as sanguinary, mournful conflicts swept across the stars. The Old Ones sent their armies through the abundant Infinity Gates on planets throughout the galaxy. In this way, destruction was carried to an unsuspecting populace in massive waves. Nameless daemoniac things alighted on worlds of their choosing, declaring themselves as emperors and their masters as gods. Those who submitted became slaves; those who would not, faced slaughter.

Cold Danda Sine's corrupted races—inculcated in the teachings of specist superiority and domination—fostered the spirit of war as they went about desolating and destroying. Although intended to grow into mighty nations that would vie for power and become the catalysts of change on their worlds and beyond, a number were conquered or held at bay by the indigenous peoples. Others, despite their origins, turned aside from evil, while yet others destroyed themselves or other domineering races before they could spread further harm.

There were also the human clans whose devotion to the Architects was practiced with frightening alacrity. The Kashi Mer Dynasty established themselves in the Outer Rim as a center for dark worship. Enamored with cabalistic knowledge and powerful artifacts, they fell into the abominable rites of sentient sacrifice, temple prostitution, and the promulgation of human superiority. Nonhumans and dissenters were sacrificed on the altar of the Goddess. Pyramids and ziggurats in the shape of Splendid Ap were erected filled with cryptic riddles; astrology, divination, necromancy, and the annual hecatomb were practiced as it was believed to have the power to summon Cold Danda Sine, though, in truth, he mocked their ardent devotion.

The earliest secret societies and cults emerged from the Kashi Mer, who sent out delegates and functionaries to other worlds to infiltrate government and establish cabals with likeminded individuals. One successful group, once in power and no longer content to work in the shadows, established themselves as occult priest-kings on the Outer Rim world of Knell, which they renamed Darkknell.

As are stars in the sky, so too are the stories that could be told of the epochal Empyrean Wars in this ancient and long-forgotten era, some of which have come down to our day as arcane mysteries. The 35,000 soldiers on Axum, listed in the Twenty Wonders of the Galaxy, had been winning a war against the vicious avian Tolvaree and several ravenous tribes of K'aarg, who had recently conquered the world of Shira when a roving band of Ghathonothoa arrived and turned all of the soldiers to brass!

In the Vorsuul system, armies of insurgents, including Felinians, Orthar-riding Kumumgah, Conjeni, and Balti fought against the Arakhyn, Ssither, and Morling, who rode the bonecrushers. When it appeared as if the latter might lose, Typhojem betrayed even his own forces and cast the system aflame. In the end, only a few escaped as the entire Vorsuul system and countless innocents were annihilated. All that remains today are the belts of asteroids now called the Oseon. The Flamewind, which annually shines, was alit in the aftermath of the war as a sign of remembrance to the countless numbers who perished there, though its significance is long forgotten.

Typhojem is responsible, as well, for having caused the catastrophe on Geonosis (then known as Geognôsis). The Greedle insect culture were battling the hordes of Tharagorrogaraht; tens of thousands of servitors, including Bartokk, Flakax, Sikurdian, Yam'rii, and Noehons, along with the hydras, merdeth, and orray, surged the moist green planet. It is believed that in order to decimate her larger forces, for it is believed that he viewed her vast armies as a threat to his own sovereignty, the servants of Typhojem were secretly instructed to redirect a comet out of its trajectory to collide with the planet's largest moon. The cataclysmic fallout wiped out huge numbers on both sides, leaving the world arid and burnt.

The Abominor mimicked these tactics on Tarin (now known as Koda's World), where the Tempestro had gathered to fight for their world. But the enemy never even alighted upon the planet. Instead, the Abominor joined together into one gargantuan death-machine that blotted out the sun, pulled a meteor from orbit, and shot it like a missile towards the Tempestro's largest city. The impact caused a massive dust cloud which enveloped their once-beautiful civilization and cost many of the Tempestro their lives.

Their victory was short-lived, however, as they were met in combat by the Silentium, who proved to be far more skilled, crafty,

and powerful. When all signs indicated the Silentium would reduce the Abominor to atoms, the Abominor master Nhar-Zhaggoth pulled back his remaining forces and re-gathered around the star of the peaceful Mu-Ab, those who had created the Silentium. There, once more they reconstituted their droid bodies into a singular, massive weapon that fired off a beam potent enough to ignite the star into supernova. Between the impact and ensuing radiation the unsuspecting inhabitants of the system, the gentle, five-limbed Mu-Ab were no more.

The Mu-Ab had been divided into two peaceful, co-existing groups: the storytellers (the Ysandun) and the crafters (the Orris). The storytellers regaled the worlds with grand works of poetry and epic verse that spread the galaxy over. The Orris were the craftsmen of their cities and technology. When they put their talents together, it was said there was nothing they could not accomplish. Together they had fashioned the earliest sapient droids based on a Celestial design provided them, the Ki'tokt, to serve as personal aides, fellow-workers, and companions for their children, for the Ki'tokt were potbellied and gentle. The second of their living creations were the more advanced Silentium. These were the dreamchildren of the Mu-Ab, powerful, elegant and wise.

Although it was believed that the Mu-Ab civilization was destroyed, the Mu-Ab did not perish, as they had remained loyal to the Celestials, so that when fire rained down on them, they were removed by the Celestials to their hidden realm. This long puzzled Typhojem who sought, to no avail, answers to this mystery. Nevertheless, it went hard with the Silentium who'd loved their makers. The Silentium remade the remnant of the Ki'tokt, their brothers, and altered them so that they could defend themselves against the predators of the galaxy. The Silentium hunted far and wide for the Abominor, but they had fled the known stars to a distant dwarf galaxy where they would rebuild and expand. This could not be allowed, and in time, the Silentium would find them again.

Despite the shroud of darkness having fallen upon the galaxy, the Firstborn and their offspring races proved hard to subjugate or kill, and as the Empyrean Wars expanded, many determined to keep their people spread out on different worlds so that they could not so easily be wiped out, while others resolved to fight 'til the last, joining forces with numerous allies to oppose the Old Ones and the traitorous peoples who had joined them.

At this time, the physically stronger races enter the war, from the Wookiees, Gigoran, Kordan and Ma'alkerrite to the gargantuan races such as the dragon slugs, giant rancors, whaladons, and zillo beasts, alongside numerous mammalian, reptilian, amphibian, insectoid, aquatic races, and others, led by the wisdom of the Firstborn who quickly recovered from the initial assault to coordinate a plan of defense and attack against the cruel adversaries that swept the lands and seas across the stars. Humans (and near-humans) also joined the fray at this time, yet tragically, some chose the side of the Architects.

Amongst the many deeds of the Firstborn during this time, the Ahra Naffi sent the giant cephalopods into water planets to aid their inhabitants against creatures like the Beck-tori, Drugon, Miridon, Chiaki, and Sando Aqua Monster; the Kalai sent colossal flocks of fierce avians to aid those worlds beset by predatory winged creatures; many of Children of the Firstborn were not warriors, and so were protected by their parent race. The Neti, for example, successfully fended off attacks on the worlds of their offspring, such as the Ergesh, M'shinn, Pliith, Rota (who came to be known as the Bouncers), and Revwien, the latter two who became healers, teachers, and diplomats during and after the war.

The deadly Acaleph shapeshifters were at last discovered by the Celebrian Firstborn, who sent out telepaths to various worlds to hunt them down with teams of Hortek, Iktochi, Hoojibs, aquatic Stribers, and Constancians, along with packs of necresh and veshet, who could sniff out the "false ones," as they called the Acaleph. In time, the evil shapeshifters were decimated, and those that survived were forced into hiding on the asteroid Mika.

Others put their technological prowess to good effect, such as the Lucent, who spun advanced defense matrices that protected entire sectors of space; their earlier development of the hyperdrive was thwarted by the traitorous race of K'kybek, who were impelled by the Old Ones to develop a hyperspace nullifier. The Aing-Tii then built vast ships that could go around this problem by instantaneously transporting through space, rescuing those under attack; the Xaxax worked alongside the Lucent, focusing their technology on the western quadrant of the galactic map where fighting was at its worst. The Sephi, like all of the Firstborn in the early days, had powers at their disposal to repel invading forces and used these to fight en masse; the Gree

developed artificial intelligences to fight in the war, defending not only their Enclave but numerous systems across the stars. The Diathim, who most closely resembled the Celestials, and the Sunesi, served as healers and messengers of the Will of the Force, and their actions saved numerous lives; the Kooroo built teleportation devices (now known as the Shrines of Kooroo) across the galaxy, which aided in this endeavor; the Oswaft unstintingly took in scores of refugees who they secluded along with themselves in a safely hidden nebula.

Those who could not provide aid sought to remove themselves as potential targets. The Sharu erected mighty pyramids and hid themselves in obfuscation, as did the Kathol, who constructed the Lifewell for the first time. The Siniteen, on the other hand, turned their backs on the galaxy, and chose a neutral position, refusing even to provide succor to former allies and those seeking shelter. It is said that the Columi were first seen around this time, a sick joke of Cold Danda Sine.

Towering beings descended upon the plains and walked the cities, whilst the tumescent hordes, amorphous and mad, frolicked in the wilds, and rubbery corpse-grinders reddened the seas. Shadow Beings prowled the aether of dreams; also Ooradryl terrorized the skies, ravaging at will with his heaving, gnawing brood, unbound by terrestrial limitations, and feeding upon all they desired, the herds of quivering flesh. And with such overlords came their armies, along with the infernal war machines.

The living energy-field of the galaxy cried out in horror and pain, and in these saturnine years, many of the Firstborn and their offspring came to bitterly regret their surrender to the stratagem of the Architects, for now that the Celestials had been forced to withdraw to other realms, their loss was seen as grievous. They had not only been the guardians of each system but its sustainers and the keys to life for those inhabitants therein. Now, the full import of their choices had come to fruition as death began its march, not only in violent attack but through illness and the degeneration of age. Into the fray of war came manifold germs, viruses, parasites, and pathogenic bacteria, which caused even greater suffering and loss of life than the teeth, claws and weapons of the enemy.

So it was that mephitic years of the Emypyrean Wars gave way to the incendiary fugue between the Celestials and the Old Ones, beginning with the War of Temporal Planes.

Chapter 25: Wutzek and the War of Temporal Planes

In the final phase of the Empyrean Wars, Typhojem discovered that the Gree Hypergates could be reconfigured to become Transdimensional Gates, their massive energies harnessed to pierce an opening through the confines of space-time, a tunnel into other dimensions, which would allow the Old Ones to infiltrate and control all the temporal planes of existence! This, he assumed, must be how the Mu-Ab escaped. He didn't yet know how to transform the Hypergate's energy, and the Gree were a potent adversary who would die before giving up their secrets, but his hierophants who studied these mysteries told him there was yet another way, a gem that they believed had the properties needed to harness their energies in this way: the Shadowstone of Tharagorrogaraht. With it, they could force open a door unto other places, perhaps even the provinces of the Celestials themselves, and rule all the spheres of existence.

Tharagorrogaraht had spies amongst the foul ranks of Typhojem and determined then that the despotic rule of her brother did not suit her plans. Further, she suspected his role in the destruction of her servitors on Geognôsis, and so instructed the Wizards of the Night Spirit, who held the gem, to conceal themselves where Typhojem's forces could not find them.

Word of the enemy's intent to use the Hypergates to pierce the dimensional veil came to the Seoulian scientist-priests, who developed a crystal-based technology that could utilize plasma beams to quickly destroy the gates. They had already been working on a means of locating the alternate dimension of the Architects and sealing it, reasoning that if the unlighted chambers of Illathurion continued to empty unto the galaxy, the universe would come to suffocate in slow, lancinating convulsions. Aided in this by the Gree, this had been their sole work until this point in time.

Now instead they began producing and exporting vast quantities of plasma cannons to numerous worlds by means of a secret network. Although spies reported these actions to Typhojem, who summarily decreed their extermination, none could discover who this secret network was.

In a matter of days, the inhabitants of Seoul 5 had succeeded in locating and destroying the hidden Star Temple that housed the Infinity Gate, preventing the adversary's surprise arrival. They had not, however, counted on the enemy flying in from the neighboring planet of Seoul 6 (which held another Infinity Gate). A grotesque, misshapen vessel descended in orbit, and out of it flew the demon-winged Stenax under the command of their king Vol. Even worse, with them came Lotek'k, a multitentacled, pelagic monstrosity, later known as the Terror from Beyond.

The Stenax were a merciless and powerful race, bred by Tilotny in the early days of Illathurion from a captured stock of S'kytri (who were themselves the offspring race of the Alashanians). Having figured out early on that the enemy would seek reprisals, the Seoulians had just enough time to move their primary labs to a vast underground city that had been created in the long years before the Empyrean Wars, for they were of the few humans who'd predicted a future calamity, as it was due to their incessant warnings of it that they'd been exiled from Notron. Many of the Seoulians fled through the planet's Hypergate and any who could not depart before they destroyed it fled underground along with their technological secrets.

The entrance to the city was hidden beneath a statue of Onrai, a clever ruse as the Stenax would not think to desecrate the idol of one whom their king still revered. In the event that the Stenax discovered them, however, a crystal matrix in the Crystal Control room in the underground city had been constructed for such an event. It powered the aboveground city, and if triggered, would destroy the city on the surface and the invaders with them. This never came to pass, although Lotek'k ravaged the cities and countryside in search of them. Content that the Seoulians could no longer prove a threat, Lotek'k propelled himself through the stars in search of other prey. The hidden Seolians never saw the surface of their world again, and it is for this reason that Lotek'k is called the Terror from Beyond, for the fear he inspired caused the Seoulians to choose a life underground, where their descendents yet remain, avoiding all outsiders.⁷

Of the secret network, it was never suspected to have been the Kwoth, now known as the Kwa. Having long regretted their misplaced trust in the false Architects, they sought for a means to rectify their grievous error. Feigning continual service to them,

⁷ It is disconcerting to know that when Han, Chewbacca, and Fem Nu-ar discovered the underground city of the Seoulians, that the inhabitants were there all along, hiding unseen, watching what the interlopers might do. Fortunately for the interlopers, the Seoulians had remained a peaceful people.

they instead began transferring plasma cannons developed by the Seoulians into various systems, where the inhabitants would use them to destroy the Hypergates. The Firstborn sent out numerous teams to systematically travel from the Deep Core outwards to every inhabited world that held a Hypergate. This became known as the War of Temporal Planes, and many adventures could be told of the brave sapients who risked torture and death on numerous worlds to destroy the means by which the Old One could rule the universe.

The destruction of their Hypergates, particularly by the Kwoth, rankled the Gree, who'd constructed their gates for the noble and necessary purpose of travel and communication, and they retained theirs, which they kept fervently guarded. It was the Kwoth Infinity Gates that they deemed the real threat, not only because they could be used as superweapons, but because they were the primary means by which invasion forces traveled the inhabited worlds in the galaxy. The Gree brought this matter before the Council of the Firstborn, but it was argued that while many Infinity Gates had been destroyed, they could not yet eliminate all of them, for they were yet needed by numerous systems in order to escape in the event of attack or to bring the fight to the enemy on their worlds. Another problem was that terrifying sentinels had been sent by the Old Ones to watch over the Star Chambers of adversarial nations. Mounting raids on the guarded Infinity Gates would have to be dealt with at a future time. For now, they had to focus their attention on eliminating the threat of the Old Ones.

The abhorrent carnage of the Empyrean Wars took a heavy toll in an orgiastic expulsion of fire and blood, and a great outcry rose up from many of the penitent Firstborn and their children. The ten-story Oracle at Pelgrin, built a millennium prior, was used to send out a distress signal to the now-departed Celestials. Few were hopeful their former guardians would heed the call, but the summons was heard and answered.

The Celestials sent out a vision to all the Firstborn, who passed it on to their faithful offspring: "This is a promise to all the extant races. Any who turn back from the darkness will find again the light, and in the fields of tomorrow be given the inheritance robbed them by the false architects and the monsters they brought into being. But the choices that have been made cannot be unmade, nor their consequences removed, for all had been warned by us against the lures of Onrai, and now the galaxy is forever changed."

All but a handful of the Firstborn had abandoned their former ways. Of these, the faithful Pelgrin requested to depart the galaxy for the domain of the Celestials, and they were granted this boon. Others followed suit.

Doomed by the madness of the Knell of Muspilli, those tenebrific thaumaturges of the Old Ones who longed to serve as kings in dark Illathurion, the innocent Muurshantre were attacked by a host of the suzerain entities summoned forth by the Knell. Many thought the Muurshantre were destroyed, for none could survive such an onslaught, but in truth, they too were transfigured and live yet in the realm of the Celestials, a story told in the widely misunderstood epic recorded in the original Taurannik Codex. The Taurannik Codex related other tales of that era, as well, including the battle between the Knell of Muspilli and the valorous Warriors of Shadow, that powerful Taung sisterhood who were not of the shadows, but hunted those dark forces in the shadows in order to make atonement for the sins of their forebears.⁸

The Codex was later discovered in fragments, restored, and corrupted by Blackhole, who sought to piece together the knowledge of the vanished Muurshantre to penetrate the dark realm of Illathurion, for in fact, the Muurshantre had been on the verge of discovering ways to penetrate that realm.

The Celestials had long searched for dark Illathurion, but had yet only discovered the pallid parallel galaxy that Splendid Ap had earlier created while fleeing Wutzek. While some argued that it was a blasphemous conception that should be abandoned, having been manufactured by the evil Architects, others felt that although it was not of their making, it was yet a living dimension in need of what support they could provide, and so deemed it necessary to enter and salvage what could be salvaged, and there they discovered a reflection of the worlds they created with some odd similarities and striking divergences. But when they were summoned by the Firstborn to provide them succor, the Celestials returned, aggrieved to find the galaxy they'd created ruined in their sight.

⁸ This connection to still-extant races also argues against the very ancient dates accepted by most. As linguists and philologists will verify, language in any civilization will change significantly from its forebear over a period of 5,000 years. 100,000 would render it wholly unrecognizable and undecipherable.

Now, out of love for their offspring, the Celestials conceded to remove the catalysts of evil from their realm and drive the Architects and the Old Ones out, and so they sent forth their champion to wade through the drowning galaxy beset by the shadow-tide of demonic hordes.

Tilotny had departed dark Illathurion for unfathomed whorls within the Deep Core, where she sought the hidden world from which the midichlorians first spread and disseminated into the galaxy. Although unable to locate it, she found a safe and nebula. Long had Tilotny spent preparing sons and daughters in her womb, each to be exquisitely beautiful and crafty, though not as beautiful or crafty as she. The Force reached out to Wutzek, champion of the Celestials, leading him to the hidden nebula where she awaited the delivery of her brood.

So that he would not spook her, Wutzek turned himself into the servitor of Gorog, the nevoota bee, and approached her, saying: "I am your maker and the one who first shaped you, and above me is the One who shaped me. Though I have done you a terrible wrong, I reach out to you now, for you have the power to reverse the evil you have done and restore things to how they should be. Do this and you will be given new gifts and life."

But Tilotny, discerning his true form, responded, "I am my own maker, Force-demon. You would do well to see that I do not use my power to un-make you."

So Wutzek said, "If indeed that is true, then is there nothing you cannot do?"

"Indeed it is true. There is nothing I cannot do."

"You have proven that you can shape the most beautiful forms, as evidenced by your own form," Wutzek said, knowing he'd had a hand in that. "But of the ugliest and most loathsome forms, you have no mastery, and, therefore, I do not believe you are so good a shaper."

"Leave me be, Force-Demon. Go and seek out ugly and loathsome forms in dark Illathurion, for there you will meet your match."

"I know of no such place in the galaxy," Wutzek said.

"We are wiser than the Celestials," she said. "But I no longer have use for this place, for I have transcended it." So it was that from Tilotny Wutzek learned of the name and location of hidden Illathurion, for she was anxious to avenge herself on her duplicitous agnates.

"Many of these ugly and loathsome things have recently come into the worlds from your former realm," Wutzek said. "It has been said that you birthed these, but I cannot believe one as beautiful as yourself capable."

At this Tilotny's pride was stoked, but she spoke haughtily. "The monstrosities of which you speak are not of my creation, for I was deceived; nevertheless, to prove to you that Tilotny is all-powerful and the maker of all things, I will show you what I can do before you depart." And at that, she transformed herself into a giant spider-roach, a shape she espied on the planets in dark Illathurion. But as revolting as the creature was, Wutzek perceived it could prove dangerous and spoke again.

"That is not so very ugly, for this creature is furtive and hardy; thus it is rather attractive in its own way."

So Tilotny reshaped herself a second time, now into the form of maze-fly. But as nasty as that creature was, Wutzek knew it was fast and could spread deadly contagion. So he challenged her again: "This is not so very ugly, for this creature is useful in the decomposition of biological organisms; thus it is rather attractive in its own way."

This speech sent Tilotny into a frenzy and she shaped herself into a hundred hideous forms in the blink of an eye before settling on the one she thought would meet Wutzek's criteria. It was based on a putrescent carrion-worm Tilotny had espied on one of Sine's repugnant worlds, but Tilotny augmented its shape and design into a parasitic repugnancy unlike any other.

Wutzek saw that it was sluggish, slow, and fearful of sunlight, and he congratulated Tilotny: "Indeed you have invented the most hideous of shapes. You have given it groping tentacles and a dozen maleficent eyes, and, in its rear, numerous squirming feelers. It carries the death stench, for it is a thing born of long-dead corpses, a feeder on the life-force and the echoes of all that is ill and misbegotten. It is this shape that you will keep and the form in which you will finish out your days. I am your maker, but you have remade yourself into an image far more fitting to your character. You will still produce offspring, indeed the seed of many have grown and are ready to emerge, but these will be like you are now, and will seek to devour you if they can because like you,

they can stand no rival. Is this not fitting justice for all the countless evils you have wrought upon the galaxy?"

When Tilotny heard this, she grew frightened and attempted to shape herself back into her former beautiful form, but she could not. All she could do was change the basic form she'd taken on, its color, eyes, head, and tail. She could add and remove cilia, claws, and teeth; she could increase the number of eyes and tentacles, but she could not change what it essentially was. For the second time in her life, fear engulfed Tilotny completely and she recognized that her powers had been taken, crushed into dust along with her former beauty.

Wutzek's globes dimmed in sadness, for he did not take pleasure in the defeat of one even so evil as Tilotny, and he still remembered that he had been her maker. "Tilotny, hear me. I can undo this. It is because of your fear of me that you first made yourself into an object to be feared. You once loved beauty, though the things you wrought were ugly and hateful. Choose love again. Aid us in restoring the worlds to their former course before you wrought horror upon them; return beauty to the universe, and you will have earned back your former shape."

The thing that had been Tilotny paused for a moment to consider his words. But for too long her thoughts had bitterly dwelt on all that was foul, hateful, and perverse. Kindness and mercy were alien to her, and she could conceive only of plots and wheels within wheels. Wutzek, in proving her a liar, tore away the impregnable fortress of delusion she'd fashioned around herself like a gown, and she hated him even more for it. Though it pained her not to take hold of her only chance to regain her beloved shape, she throttled the desire and cleaved to her anger and hatred. Thus, Tilotny disgorged a curse: "You wish me to undo that which I've done because you perceive your own hand in all that has come about. If I am your creation, then you are responsible for all that has transpired. And because you fear them, you would have me destroy the brood that I am birthing, your own grandchildren. Curse you, Force-demon! The day is at hand when you will find yourself trapped and powerless as I am now, and know that that which bursts forth from my womb will strive to consume all until nothing is left but the skeletal remains of each world, hanging like a necklace of bone in the starless void, and it will be your doing!"

Wutzek grew angry at this prophetic speech, but sad also, for he believed then that she would never return from the vicious thing she had chosen to become. "Then Tilotny is no more," he said. "You are El'Shuddem, the Soulworm. Since you have called up the void, it is in the void that you will dwell and in solitude will you writhe and hunger until the end of your days when in despair you have devoured yourself." Upon saying this, he moved on.

El'Shuddem shuddered, recalling the poem that Mnggal-Mnggal had recited. No longer able to stand the pain of her loss or endure what she had become, she began to spin around and around to catch her tail in her mouth so that she could consume herself and die. In the spinning, sinuous windings of her long and agonizing death throes, she began to forge a force of such density it caused an immense wormhole. Then, the Soulworm El'Shuddem, who was once the self-proclaimed Queen of the Stars, gave birth.

In madness and hunger, the worms tunneled through the cavity of Tilotny's womb, burrowing their way out of her body as they fled through the wormhole, finding deep, dark lairs in which to burrow within the numerous worlds of the galaxy.

Tilotny's brood came to be some of the most feared beings in the universe, the ravenous Leviathans, the blasphemous Silans, the ghoulish Barracles and Glooths, the fearsome Faroe and Apollyon, the predatory Schinga, the hideous Nharqis'Al, and others who retained the all-consuming fear and hatred for life bequeathed from their mother, so that they became receptacles of the dark side, drawing sustenance from the life-energies of the living. The Sith Lords would later augment these creatures, making them even more powerful.

Hundred of lesser forms spawned from this brood, seeding the planets and moons of the galaxy with the Kdak, the giant Wuffa Worms, the Hulgren, the Wandrella, the K'lor'slug, the Burrowers, the Spice Eels, the Exogorths, the Squollyhawk, and others imbued with the violence, hunger, and greed of El'Shuddem in her final moments of rage and despair. And those living on those worlds were stained by the contamination of their darkness.

Wutzek's words repeated in Tilotny's mind, and even as she was dying, she found a means in which to fulfill them and recover again a lost piece of her. Yet, she would not use it to reshape her own form, but to give it to that of her very last offspring. In those final moments she found again a kind of love amidst the pain and horror, and sacrificed herself for this one final birth, one final

shape, which would take the form she had so prized. Into her beloved offspring's mind, she implanted not only her beauty but the keys to her survival.

The infant girl that emerged was beautiful, but stricken by the grief of her dying parent and overcome by the loneliness that followed, but always she kept her mother's instructions deep within her mind: dissimulation, charm, and beauty would be the keys to her ascension. Violence the means by which she would maintain it. War the summons that would bring her back time and again. She would survive and triumph, for the galaxy was hers to rule, as it had been her mother's. Tilotny named her daughter Mourning, and it was only slightly altered in later times when her true nature became known and she was called by the Killiks the vain, evil one: Abeloth.

* *

Having discovered the location of the dimension of dark Illathurion, and of the diabolic things proliferating there, Wutzek penetrated the shroud of the hidden realm. There, he approached Cold Danda Sine who was in the midst of all his dark servitors, and those in far-off worlds were made witness to the events that unfolded.

Wutzek said: "I am your maker and the one who first shaped you, and above me is the One who shaped me. Though I have done you a terrible wrong, I reach out to you now, for you have the power to reverse the evil you have done and restore things to how they should be. Do this and you will be given new gifts and life."

But Cold Danda Sine responded, "I know of no maker, Maker, only the great Void and that is the sole master, for all others are but its servants. I will not reverse my reversions, nor provide restoration, for that is, as with all things, dull."

"You were not meant to be what you are," Wutzek stated, "and for that, I bear some responsibility, but since it is you who made yourself into what you became—you who were without constraint or lack of anything—why is it that you speak with such melancholy?"

"There is no pleasure left to me," said Cold Danda Sine wearily, "for I have seen and done all, for all that is novel at first becomes tiresome; all that is young and new becomes old and decrepit; all that promises fascination grows toilsome; all ends in death and futility lies at its heart. Would that I reversed my reversions, as you wish, restored all to light and splendor, the light will only again grow dim; the splendor will but turn to rust and ash; all that has happened will happen again, in endless cycles, with lessening glory than at first; for that is the way of the worlds."

"Indeed," Wutzek intoned with his glowing orbs, "for you have now seen the worlds in decrescent cycles and learned the ultimate truth, or so you believe, of all that is fallen. Yet, you were not there at the first; you had not seen us dance in boundless joy at the foremost strains of melody in the auroral glow of the dawn heavens, nor heard the refulgent promise of eternal quotidian bliss, nor felt the incalcescence of love. All these things I'd have shown you..."

For once, Cold Danda Sine was silent for a moment before bitterly murmuring, "If you had wished, you or your maker could have cast all these worlds and dimensions in a net and sent them back through time to start anew, a universe renascent, but you did not, for you too know the cycle has no end and is wearisome beyond compare. I have no strength left for it..."

So Wutzek said, "I have not given you that which I should have, but I come now with a challenge that may please you. You had been a master of the anti-concept, but the final one yet remains, the ultimate contradiction, a paradox that you have not yet attained, and the final new thing; for you know that you are immortal, and yet now exist as one who is dead. If you are able, you should die that you may come to life."

Cold Danda-Sine considered this, and for a moment his crimson face alighted in the realization that this was the final paradox, for from his earliest moments of life, death was the first thing he knew and conceived. Perhaps in his final moments of death, he might yet know life. He wondered at this. Tilotny would have said it was a trick, but she was a master of the lie, particularly those lies she told herself. In a strange way, as much as he'd come to loathe her, he missed her, and in her passing—which he'd felt—he had diminished as well and become weary of all things. Even those things he'd conjured up no longer brought pleasure, save perhaps the thought of Aerimus, but even that was mingled with grief for what the future held. At last then, he sought the

infrangible solitude of death. "You abandoned me at my birth; I suppose it is good that you are here at my death. Perhaps you might even assist me in this endeavor..." So it was that with the aid of Wutzek, Cold Danda Sine's body collapsed into itself to become a storming vortex of deadly forces and raging energies of chaos, enigma and antithesis.

And Wutzek spoke sadly and said: "Cold Danda Sine is no more. He has become the eversion of a reversion and has created a new thing. But in time, even death will invert, as is the way of Cold Danda Sine..."

Trembling at the power of Wutzek and the death of Cold Danda Sine, the spawn of the Architects fled in terror, lest they too be destroyed. Typhojem hesitated, staring at Wutzek with an unyielding rage. From that moment forth, he sought nothing but Wutzek's destruction. Yet for the time, he too passed on through the opened doorways into far-off reaches of dark Illathurion from which they might hide.

Splendid Ap alone remained, for he was curious of this being that he recalled from another time and place. With Tilotny and Cold Danda Sine gone, he had lost much of his former knowledge and skill, and he felt befuddled and thick. Was this how most sapients felt? Wutzek approached Splendid Ap and said to him: "I am your maker and the one who first shaped you, and above me is the One who shaped me. Though I have done you a terrible wrong, I reach out to you now, for you have the power to reverse the evil you have done and restore things to how they should be. Do this and you will be given new gifts and life."

And Splendid Ap, feeling a sudden insight, said in the language of numbers and dials that few besides his maker could understand, "I recollect that you were also the one who sought to unmake us, though it has taken me long to understand why. You well know that I had the power to reverse all that we had done and restored all to how it was before, for I had been a master of time and space, but I did not because I estimated at last that to do so would be to violate inviolate laws, which I intuit is unwise, though I do not fully apprehend why that may be."

"You have answered wisely and well," and with that Wutzek brought Splendid Ap before the Supreme Maker, who taught him the wisdom, compassion, justice, and balance of power that the other Celestials had received in the first days, so that Splendid Ap came to discern good and evil, and was entrusted with a great task, one that would make special use of his talents.

Chapter 26: The Left-Handed God

With the coming of Wutzek, the Empyrean Wars had drawn to a close, but there were yet rustlings in the dark places of the expanse. The myrmidon of Gorog, the rustling nyctocrys, the nevoota, and other things in shadow multiplied in those days. The great worms of El'Shuddem nested and grew. The fell races begotten by Cold Danda Sine in the funereal depths of dark Illathurion were sedulously swelling into vast nations that might one day rise up against their galactic neighbors.

Now it is said that Typhojem so despised discourse that for every word he spoke, a living creature was put to death in his name. Thus it was with barely concealed loathing that Typhojem invoked the aid of Tharagorogaraht, "Foul majesty that art my sister, summon forth your roaring sultans, for I have long known they have a tourmaline of vast power, and I wish to use it for a time."

Tharagorogaraht responded in her wheezing clicks and susurrations: "The Shadowstone is not for you, dread king and brother, but for the protection of my offspring who will soon come forth. Also, the Hypergates have nearly all been destroyed."

"It is not for the secrets of the Hypergates that I now wish the Shadowstone," Typhojem swore, "though I have not forgotten that you forsook to answer my summons then, for we might yet rule the spheres outside of this domain had you done so."

"Speak not of treachery," warned the Night Spirit, "for I know of your hand in the destruction of my children on Geognôsis! Nevertheless, by virtue of our rotting father, I shall allow you to use it for a time. You would be wise to return it to my sorcerers when you have completed your task, for they forged it in the blood of a thousand adepts during the black moon in the Carrion Gardens of Azerdaaque." The Wizards of the Night Spirit were then called forth to give unto Typhojem their precious gem.

Among the gem's many powers was the protection it gave against destructive forces, and with it, Typhojem safely descended into the raging whirlwinds that was once his sire. Braving the crushing forces that stormed there, he hurled into the vortex—where the greatest pressures were exerted—a rare and precious stone he'd carved out of the core of a planet destroyed in the Red Nebula, and upon it, cast ghastly necromantic spells. The terrific pull of the magnetic fields focused on that enchanted gem so that the gem transferred and absorbed those properties unto itself. And with that, the apex of the electrical storm was forever changed into a marvel of silence, for its fury was now spent. So awful did this region become that even Typhojem, in all his malignancy, could not stand its solemnity and what it portended, and time would touch nothing that passed into it.

After this, dread Typhojem departed Otherspace for the Deep Core to seek out his mother's remains, and there he came upon the tremendous rift that was the wormhole El'Shuddem created in her self-devouring, death-winding throes. Into it he declined, heading deep within its fulminating core, where he located the crystallized remains of his hated mother's heart. It was a small and hard thing, and upon it, he weaved a second invultuation. But the turbulent wormhole trebled in potency and increased in violence causing several wormholes to branch off from it as roving tempests, reemerging throughout realspace like lightning in a blackened sky. But the original became far more redoubtable and descended into itself to become the portal to that mysterious, nighted realm beyond the void that is called Chaos. Typhojem was nearly trapped within it, but the Shadowstone lent him the strength to break free.

So disturbed was Typhojem by this portentous chain of events that he nearly abandoned his scheme. But the power of El'Shuddem's scarlet crystal restored his resolve, and he departed in search of Splendid Ap, intent on creating a third power source, one that combined with the others would render him more powerful than all the Celestials. But Splendid Ap could not be found, nor was rumor heard of him in the galaxy. He then discovered the nascent parallel dimension Splendid Ap had created and kept secret, and into it he sent a number of the caliginous forces of dark Illathurion to spy and breed and spread out amongst the shadows.

When after a time no word came back of Splendid Ap, he envisaged that he'd been utterly destroyed or had transferred himself to other planes of existence. Typhojem considered keeping the Shadowstone, but his sister knew the blackness of his heart, and her servants ever kept a watchful eye. She would wage an eternal war against him if he dared offend her steadfast servitors, and he could not allow for distractions at this time. One day, he vowed, she would be taught her place.

Typhojem gathered a legion of malignant forces in the newly constructed megalithic, quinquangular ship, the Nil-Apharas (the Pale Slayer). Four hundred, gathered from the native worlds and sundry races of dark Illathurion, were slaughtered to celebrate the maiden voyage of the Nil-Apharas, which could cross dimensions and employ hypertechnology—for the Architects had found the keys to unlocking the Celestials' mysteries—to sail the hyperlanes. Captained by Si'kranosh, one of his foul lieutenants, it led smaller ships also equipped with faster-than-light drives into the Outer Rim of realspace. Tharagorrogaraht and the Wizards of the Night Spirit returned to dark Illathurion, for she could communicate telepathically with her insect swarms that departed with Typhojem, and "see" what her brother was doing. Also, she preferred the concealment of her crepuscular lair as she was uncertain how the battle would turn out, fearing that the coming of the Celestials would mean their end, and it was for this reason alone that she'd allowed Typhojem use of the Shadowstone.

The Nil-Apharas arrived at the inhabited human world Sarn. The cyclopean ship descended to hover in atmosphere above Sarn's surface and awaited nightfall. Curious residents from all around gathered to marvel at the colossal, golden ship of strange angles (which to their eyes appeared triangular in shape). Then in the deepest part of the night, down like noctilucent flies, the Spawn of the Architects descended upon the unsuspecting planet and devoured every living man, woman, and child.

Only one inhabitant was allowed to remain alive. Driven mad by what he'd been forced to witness, he was sent through an Infinity Gate to a neighboring world to spread word of the doom that came to Sarn.⁹ Word reached Wutzek, traversing the spaces between worlds, who arrived to find Sarn a land of death and horror. There, hovering above atmosphere was a strange ship Wutzek had never before seen. When he drew nearer to investigate, the trap was sprung! In his left hand, dread Typhojem raised up before Wutzek the magnetic gem, now transformed into an angle-trap, the only thing in existence that could ensnare a Celestial. It immobilized Wutzek, as the armies of darkness poured out of the ship like a deadly swarm, to watch and mock. It is for this reason that the followers of Typhojem referred to him as the "left-handed god."

Typhojem then joined to it the crimson-colored gem, trebling the entity's tempestuous rage and power. Wutzek warned him, "One such as I cannot die. Put aside your impotent rage and join with me to restore this galaxy that was ruined not by you, but by a progenitor you hate."

"One that I hated, yes, but not my progenitor, nor the one that you destroyed."

"I merely opened the door. Cold Danda Sine chose his path. So must you. Why should you and those who follow you go into destruction when there is a better way?"

"You speak to me as if I am one of your pale Celestials, as if I am one of the inglorious Firstborn, who so easily abandoned the ways of your Maker who sits frozen on his boreal throne, indifferent to the horrors of a galaxy crumbling under the feeble rule of the Celestials. You are correct when you say there is a better way. I am that better way."

With outstretched wings, Typhojem threw back his tentacled head and raised his hand to unleash waves of searing energy. Channeled through the Gem of Fury, death-dealing bolts of electric current pounded upon the interlinked globes that formed Wutzek's body. And before the eyes of the amassed armies of dark Illathurion, the Celestial that was Wutzek shrieked in anguish as his glowing globules became opaque until finally, they disintegrated in smoke and ash.

Horrid cachinnation rose up from the armies of darkness as they celebrated the death of a Celestial. The region where Wutzek perished came to be called Aznak, which meant "noxious lights," for a ghastly, corposant fog arose from the charring of Wutzek that would not disperse, and the sector was transformed into a strange nebula that was later avoided by the Spawn of the Architects who feared the ethereal lights that moved to and fro with a pale opalescent glow. In later times, after the galaxy was altered, it was removed from realspace and is said to have become something else.

With Wutzek dead, a powerful light had gone out of the universe and the Spawn of the Architects could now move unhindered through it. Typhojem came to be revered among the fell races as their Dark Sovereign, and as he descended into his chalcedony palace on Sarn, he proclaimed them the new masters of the spheres. His greatest lieutenants were sent to Coruscant and other Core worlds to subjugate the humans, while the remaining grinning perversions of dark Illathurion were told to prepare to move into the galaxy.

⁹ The world would later come to have an evil reputation, and was later renamed Garn, which meant "haunted," and there are those who say it still is.

Chapter 27: Horliss-Horliss Throws a Shape

Horliss-Horliss had long before journeyed to the domain of the Celestials where he had been transfigured. With the death of Wutzek, he reemerged as a glorious being, and now led the Firstborn remnant against the tenebrous hordes of the invidious Old Ones.

Into dark Illathurion, Horliss-Horliss soared as a great and terrifying light, and he spoke into the minds of all who yet dwelt there a promise that any who would now reject the darkness would be reborn into the light, and many of the night creatures, great and small, actually came out of the shadows at this time, as did the victims of Cold Danda Sine's failed experiments and any who wished to escape the hellish realm of horror. Horliss-Horliss proved true to his word, transferring them to worlds in realspace suitable to their needs. To the rest who would not emerge from the shadow, he issued a warning. Should any ever depart the darkness of their realm, Wutzek would return to exact vengeance.

Since the victory of Typhojem, Coruscant was covertly being ruled by the forces of his great lieutenant Mhu'anThul, who sought to utilize the humans as his personal slaves. In order to curry favor with the new galactic sovereigns, Chancellor Chen Yorge, a ruthless autocrat, and his administration, handed thousands of dissenters over to the divers host of Typhojem. When the thirteen Battalions of Zhell were called in to aid in rounding up enemies of the state, the thirteenth alone refused to comply. Branded as traitors and against overwhelming odds, they went underground and birthed a resistance movement against the occupation. Outraged, Chen ordered the other twelve to track down and eliminate the thirteenth. Only a few disobeyed, and of these, some joined their outnumbered brothers.

With the resistance swelling and gaining popular support, and little success on the part of the twelve Battalions to hunt down their former brothers, the Chancellor then changed tack and offered the thirteenth a truce. If they laid down arms and publicly declared submission to the rule of law on Coruscant, the the political prisoners and they would be permitted to establish a colony in one of the old Taung districts. The thirteenth Battalion agreed to discuss terms and were told to come to a meeting-place in the vast Necropolis District.

The thirteenth knew it was a ruse to draw them out, but if a way to save the prisoners was possible they had to risk it. They expected the twelve Battalions to be there to engage them in battle, so when they arrived, they came with a fully allied force at least ten times their number. What they had not realized was the depth of their betrayal.

The twelve Battalions were there, but they were instructed not to engage. At an unheard signal, thousands of the Rozzum rose up from the recondite mounds of the dead. And worse! It was discovered that Mhu'anThul had left his baleful prism, the unspeakable chambers of viscera on Mezzallmech in the netherworld of Illathurion, to lead them. President Chen, they then discovered had been acting as a figurehead, his governance a puppet-regime to keep the humans in line while the actual rule of Coruscant had been transferred to the dark lord of Mezzallmech. Dissidents were taken to the Carrion Gardens of Azerdaaque and fed alive to the mouths of a thousand ravening barracles.

The battle that was fought was beyond description, but the thirteenth fought on, nearly to their end, when at last their brethren in the other twelve Battalions joined them, horrified by what they were seeing and by what their blind obedience had allowed to happen. Suspecting as much, Mhu'anThul then released shenbit bonecrushers, farleks, and akorec. Behind them marched an army of the hideous Zanibar.

What remnant was left of the ensanguined and enervated human host charged into the miasmal horde. All would have died that day were it not for the arrival of Horliss-Horliss to smite the tentacled head off Mhu'anThul's putrescent corpse, which fell and crushed a number of the Zanibar. So extirpative was his defeat by the advent of Horliss-Horliss that even mephitic Gorog was said to have weaved dense webs in her labyrinthine lair in which to hide. Into seclusion as well went the Vathyr, Ooradryl, Waru, Uthoquuan, and Nyeegath, who were the only ones of their kind to have survived the Empyrean Wars.

Horliss-Horliss now turned his attention to Typhojem and once again proved himself crafty and wise. He called upon the forbidden name of Typhojem that Tilotny had first uttered upon seeing her loathed firstborn son, for Splendid Ap had since

revealed all the secrets of the Architects. In a rush, Typhojem rose up from his adamantine throne on Garn, and his servitors rose with him, following him in a train to the Inner Rim, where Horliss-Horliss awaited.

Typhojem again wielded the crystalline heart of El'Shuddem and the Circean angle-trap that had aided him in the defeat of Wutzek. As he flew off to annihilate his opponent, Horliss-Horliss created a null inversion in space, in which he set as a trap of his own. Then, as Typhojem approached in all his terrifying power, Horliss-Horliss utilized the gems in the foul entity's grasp to create a maelstrom that erupted like a barrage of torrefying and caustic winds. Caught between inexorable forces Typhojem's minions were pulled into the nothingness or rent apart by the maelstrom.

Horliss-Horliss alighted at the edge of the barrier, sending out concentrated waves of coruscating, pure light, so brilliant it lit up the infinite darkness of space like a blazing sun. Typhojem would neither flee, nor give in to the forces tearing at him, but instead strove towards Horliss-Horliss intent on his destruction. Yet his body was not as strong as his will, and it began to pull apart his membranous wings and limbs. At last, he let out a final agonizing wail that shattered the neighboring moons. Typhojem's body splintered into pieces, which stiffened in petrification before being sucked into null inversion, where parts of him were hurled into odd regions of the galaxy. Si'kranosh alone escaped back to Illathurion aboard the Nil-Apharas, as the evil of Typhojem passed into Chaos. Thus did Horliss-Horliss avenge Wutzek, his father, before going off to find and destroy other sinister forces in the galaxy.

All that is left of the victory over Typhojem is the Black Hole of Nakat (which means "hole in a vessel") and the Magataran ("jeweled") Maelstrom, and an expression has come down to our day of being trapped between the two. It is said that from the ossified remains of Typhojem, the Killiks later formed the worlds of Korriban, Sessa, Kareda, Kessel, and its "moon" that bordered the region known as the Maw Cluster. Legends have also said that the glitterstim that runs through the veins of the world is the foetid ichor of Typhojem and that the giant spiders that live there were so fond of their dread sovereign that they made purchase in the deep hollows of his broken skull, spinning memories of their lost home on dark Illathurion. But these are only legends.

Others say that Typhojem is not dead, but only dreaming, preparing for the day he will awaken to reclaim his infrangible throne on spectral Garn, but this is a falsehood perpetuated by the Thrella and the Sith, who continued to worship the horrid one. In the passage of the ages, the idea came to extend to Cold Danda Sine also, who is remembered as Kopa Kahn, the god of death and dying. And perhaps that would have amused him.

The crystal heart of El'Shuddem came to find purchase on Circarpous V, known as Mimban. Its allure drew Wandrellas, Hssiss, and a roaming Glooth, who burrowed deep beneath the crust of the planet near to where the crystal lay. It lent the Glooth power and a glimpse of the forgotten ages when the Old Ones were masters of the spheres.

The Thrella people came later. An evil humanoid race who had served the dark forces in the wars, they felt drawn to the power of the Glooth's habitation, where they discovered the carmine crystal. Recognizing it as the jewel of Typhojem, they built a massive temple around the crystal, dedicating it to their sleeping deity, and sacrificed many there. The crystal was named "Kaiburr," which in the Threllan tongue meant "splinter of fire," for it gave a measure of strength and healing to those in its proximity. So many legends sprung from it that in later years all living crystals that were attuned to the Force were referred to as kyber crystals, and the mineral in which they grew kyberite, and indeed there were striking similarities, as both were used as focusing crystals in lightsabers and other deadly weapons.

In time, the Thrella were split by a civil war that degenerated into two groups, the Mimbanite, and Coway tribes. Typhojem devolved into Pomojema, a third-rate demon-god whose temple was seldom visited in later days, save for those who needed healing, for the tribes had grown to fear and hate Pomojema. The crystal continued to heal, yet ever the Glooth nested deep underneath that mephitic and shadowed hieron, drawing sustenance from it. Darth Vader encountered the insane and ravenous creature when he fell into its lair a year before the assault on Hoth. It struck out at the one-armed Sith Lord in an expulsion of bloodlust and fury. The fierce battle ended with a weary Vader chopping the insane Glooth into several sanguinary pieces, and the power of the Kaiburr Crystal—which over the millennia had come to have a symbiotic relationship with the creature—diminished in grief at the loss of its companion. Yet, shards from it continued to be harvested for lightsaber crystals, and in the case of the Dark Lady Lumiya, for her lightwhip.

Chapter 28 The Killiks and the Ones

Horliss-Horliss brought the War of Temporal Planes to its end. Fear now lit the obsidian multitude, for they discerned the great power of this being who could kill one of the Old Ones, and those that could scurried back to the dead worlds of Otherspace. But not all. The pestilent hordes of Gorog, tasked with spreading the worship of their master, had disappeared in the underground on whatever planets they happened to be on to await the instructions of their tenebrous master who would one day summon them from the gulfs of dark Illathurion.

The western quadrant of the galaxy, which had seen some of the worst fighting, was ruined. The Celestials ensured that they remain inaccessible, for they knew that Mnggal-Mnggal had occluded himself deep on one of the many planets there, and though search parties were sent, he could not be found.¹⁰ Those living in the western quadrant were warned of the dangers, knowing that in time the residents of the galaxy would learn to travel the stars again, not through gates, but via ships, for which reason had hyperspace long before been created. Thus were the star-routes and hyperlanes in the Unknown Regions, as it came to be called, tangled.

Horliss-Horliss aided in the removal of the remaining Hypergates. Thousands were shattered throughout the galaxy. The standing arches in the Gree Enclave are the few that remain of their former wonder, preserved in honor of the galactic bond once shared in better times, but their secrets long-ago lost for the Gree elders agreed not to pass them on. The Infinity Gates were again left standing, as transportation was yet needed for refugees and others to return to their worlds. Their remaining sentinels were destroyed or went into seclusion on allied worlds, and the gates were altered so that they could not be used as weapons save by the Kwa, who were entrusted with their secrets in the event that the Old Ones chose to return.

A hidden portal at demon-haunted Garn remained, only later to be discovered that it provided a tunnel to and from dark Illathurion, yet it was concealed and forgotten for aeons, and now it too now lies in dust. Other evil implements of these forgotten times remained, and some have not yet been revealed.

At the end of the War of Temporal Planes, in the Grand Convocation of the Celestials, Lluxos suggested that just as the hidden world of the midichlorians would continue to be protected by a Shaman of the Whills, so too should the Celestials continue to play a role in the lives of those they'd created, enabling them to defend themselves in the event of the return of the dark forces and war. All agreed, but the means by which they could do this remained a challenge, as they would not create weapons of war that could be misused to dominate and harm others.

The Killiks knew of a way to aid in this, and with the help of the Celestials and others amongst the Firstborn, they brought about the Ciratu Spheres, the Aur Diamonds, the five stars of the Quintarad in the Void of Aogros, the Diatian Clockwork, the Ianane Ring, the Malabar Construct, the World Puller, the Still Curtain, the Chasm of Forever, the Cosmic Turbine, and other wonders that served various purposes, but could mainly be used as a defense against the return of the Old Ones. The secrets to their workings were each shared with only a few trusted beings in each sector in which they were housed, and who would pass it on to their offspring, yet as they were semi-sentient constructs, they could only be wielded by ones who proved peace-loving and wise.

In the reorganization of the galaxy, Horliss-Horliss and the Celestials saw fit to provide succor to even enemy nations who saw their worlds vanquished. Numerous nations who had fought on the side of the Old Ones were allowed to resettle in uninhabited systems, though their weapons were taken from them, and they warned that they should learn to live peaceably.

Refugees from the wars were sent to Coruscant and other Core worlds, yet ever after, some humans would resent the alien immigrants and recall the days when they were the sole rulers of their planet, having forgotten that Coruscant originally belonged to the Taung, whom they had committed a genocidal war against. But the exiled Taung did not forget, remembering it ever in song and legend.

The remnant of the thirteen Battalions of Zhell, along with many dissenters and former political prisoners, petitioned Horliss-

¹⁰ Several surviving races who had served the Old Ones also made this region their home.

Horliss to obtain for them a new world, wishing for complete independence from the political system of Coruscant, for although Chancellor Chen Yorge was dead, there were yet others already vying for power against opposing parties, all of whom had been guilty of colluding with Mhu'anThul.

The Killiks offered to assist in this endeavor, asking that Horliss-Horliss aid them in the final part of the construction of the World Puller, which they called Qolaraloq, an elaborate and enormous space station that would act as both protective force-field and tractor beam. Horliss-Horliss provided a tiny sun (later called glowpoint), which would power the semi-sentient station's nuclear, magnetic, electric, tractor and hyperspace energy systems. Qolaraloq (later renamed Centerpoint Station) then took three uninhabited moons and three uninhabited planets from Coruscant's system and transported them through hyperspace to an uninhabited sector within the Core. The planets came to be known as the Five Brothers, with the world nearest the sun called the Eldest. Two other lifeless worlds, indigenous to the system, were placed in this new orbit. The Sons of Freedom were brought to live on the Eldest Brother, which they renamed after one of their heroes, Corellia. Their primary star was called Corell, which had the coincidental meaning "Little Core." Talus and Tralus were named after the deceased twin commanders of the 13th Battalion who went up against Mhu'anThul, and these were given to the Drall and Selonian, two valiant races who had also fought in the War of Temporal Planes and saw their worlds in the Vorsuul System broken beyond repair. Representatives from all three races formed an unbreakable ruling Triad that governed their system. The semi-sentient construct Qolaraloq was designed along the lines of other Killik constructs, to bond to one who was morally suitable to wield it. This arrangement served for millennia before it and its workings were forgotten.

Convening the Celestials once more, Elegast suggested that although could they not serve directly as guides to a progeny who had severed their connection to them and would thus ever find themselves at war until the time of the greater Restoration, the galactic inhabitants would do well to have guides from amongst themselves, those strong in the Force who might direct them as the Firstborn had once done. Elegast determined that he personally would lead them, not as a Celestial, but as an incarnate human with the wisdom and power of the Celestials. With him would come Eipha and Niphal to embody wisdom and power, and he to embody justice and maintain the balance. The Force itself would embody love. Lluxos cautioned that there would be a danger that such ones would slide into darkness, while Marutz, warned that this would prove far more taxing than they realized, and Xurz reminded them that they had not been made to long endure suffering and violence, for which reason they'd departed the Prime Universe in the first place.

After invocations to the Supreme Maker, it was learned that although Elegast would maintain the balance for long years, he would eventually fail to choose compassion and all he loved would begin to perish. Upon that event, a Chosen One should be raised up to replace him. The Celestials pondered what might happen if this Chosen One also failed, but Horliss-Horliss reminded them that it did not matter, as the prophecy of restoration indicated that sooner or later one would arise from amongst them, the Suns of Light, reciting the relevant portion from the writings of the Ancient Order of the Whills:

In the time of greatest despair, there shall come a savior, and he shall be known as the Son of the Suns, and in the ages beyond, the worlds will be remade, as in the splendor of its earliest days, and they will never again feel sorrow or harm."

On a hidden world, a pocket dimension between realspace and the realm Beyond Shadows, the Celestials created the Wellspring of Balance, from which Elegast incarnated into mortal form. From the Font of Power was incarnated Eipha, who became known as the Son, and from the Pool of Knowledge was incarnated Niphal, who became known as the Daughter.

The three came to be known as the Ones, and at the end of the War of Temporal Planes, they announced themselves to the galaxy as the "true architects," who had come to help rebuild and restore. Elegast, or Father, as he was then known, for they sought to present themselves in ways the galactic inhabitants could understand, reiterated the earlier promise of the Celestials given at the start of the Empyrean Wars. The galaxy belonged to its inhabitants, but they must strive to maintain the balance between power, wisdom, and love, and he would help balance the scales of justice to aid them in this endeavor.

Assisted by the Kwa, the pyramidal Tho Yor ships were created at this time, intended to traverse the galaxy collecting force-sensitives from numerous races to study and grow to become fellow guardians and protectors of the balance. But in the passage of time, Elegast came to see how truly the Ancient of Days had spoken, for as the turbulence of the galaxy ever swung towards

war, so too would his Son and Daughter become sorely affected, and the Father put forth a saying into the galaxy at this time that "Love without power and wisdom is hypocrisy and sentiment. Power without love and wisdom is foolishness and violence. Wisdom without love and power is arrogant recreance. Yet the one who has love, power, and wisdom can shape the galaxy."

The Wellspring of Balance, the Font of Power, and the Pool of Knowledge were maintained to ensure that he and his offspring would, in mortal bodies, remain alive over the ages, for although time passed differently on their world, still it passed. Yet those very same waters would prove volatile to Eipha and Niphal, with the Son gravitating towards the Font of Power in order to regain his physical strength, and Niphal the Pool of Knowledge in order to regain her mental energy, both of which were drained by the galactic imbalance. But in this way did it escalate and intensify the differences between them, so that in time, they become as avatars of Darkness and Light, and like the galaxy itself, never truly able to become whole or one.

Their natures now so opposed, Son and Daughter frequently fought amongst themselves, and in their most contentious battle, they accidentally destroyed the Wellspring of Balance. Despite their animosity, they loved one another and longed to be together. Father strived incessantly, but without the Wellspring, he soon grew weary in his task and was unable to restore the balance in himself. In this way did a deep loneliness set in, and he began to regret having coming to this plane.

So it was that he accepted into their family a stranger.

She was as beautiful and graceful as the Celestials and a happy distraction from the endless struggles that beset him and his offspring. The woman appeared to be one of the Diathim, yet she had no memory of her past, not even her name, recalling only that she'd walked through an ancient portal and arrived there. This was a mystery, but he could detect no evil or deception in her, resolving only that an ancient gate, perhaps a damaged one, had brought her from lego to this world.

She, in time, proved loyal and beloved by the Ones, and was invited to stay on as a servant. Father deemed her to be the embodiment of love, for what greater servant was there than love. The only thing forbidden her was the Font of Power and Pool of Knowledge, for the Father explained that they were sanctified only for him and his offspring for the sole purpose of guiding the galaxy. As she had no interest in anything but their love, she happily conceded.

She soon became the Father's wife, and thus was known as Mother to his offspring. For many years, the family seemed healed and complete, and the Father came to see that as the Son was Power and the Daughter Wisdom, he Justice, and she Love, then the four traits of the Eternal were in balance. Surely this must be the Will of the Force, a gift from the Supreme Maker for his sacrifice. She brought nothing but joy and peace to the Ones, redirecting the Son and Daughter's powers for useful purposes. Even the Shamaness who guarded the world of the Midichlorians could not convince him otherwise, for she reminded him that the Force was love, not this mysterious stranger whose guise even she could not penetrate. Yet, he would not send Mother away, for he loved her.

Despite all the good they did, the Father had misgivings. Mother was not of the Celestials, and thus mortal, and while the two waters of Power and Knowledge would preserve alive the Ones, she could not drink of them, and would, therefore, grow old and die.

Soon enough, the Mother did grow old, so too did she grow melancholy, knowing that her family would grieve her when she passed. Yet a strange voice within her kept saying that she was being abandoned, that Elegast could save her if he wished, but he cherished his powers more than her. She often ignored these voices, but as she grew older she began to pay them more heed and they grew louder in her mind.

It cannot be stated for a certainty what might have occurred had the Father bestowed immortality upon her, as his children had pleaded with him to do. Yet, for all his weakness for her, Elegin was a Keeper of the Laws, and not one to break them even in so grievous a situation as this. Still, Son and Daughter insisted that she was special, unique, and meant to be one of them. After all, was she not his wife and their adopted mother? Surely, if an exception were to be made, this was the case. Though it distressed him greatly, the Father chose not to risk this even to prolong her life. The Son never forgave him for this, charging him with choosing law over love.

Mother continued to age until at last the voices in her head urged her to take matters into her own hands. If Father would not save her, she must save herself. After all, how could he carry on his weighty burdens without her? How would Son and Daughter

maintain their balance without her there to help them?

So, she drank.

Water from the Font of Power restored her youth and vigor, but it awoke something else in her, a great and terrible strength that she'd never before known and yet seemed somehow familiar. But it was the Pool of Knowledge that told her who she really was, Abeloth, the beloved daughter of Tilotny, worshipped throughout the galaxy as Onrai, Queen of the Stars, and Vahl, the dark goddess. In the death throes of her mother, condemned by a Celestial, had the spirit of Tilotny become imbued in her. Abeloth now knew she was born to be the true ruler of the galaxy. So that is why Father denied her! He must somehow have intuited the truth. Never again would she be dominated by a Celestial. It was they who must bow before her!

The Father was horrified when he discovered what she'd done, but she accused him of knowing all along who she really was, of having subjugated her for his own selfish needs and then allowed her to grow old and die so that she could not fulfill her true destiny to supplant the Celestials as master of the stars. When Abeloth went off to meditate on the received memories of her mother unfolding rapidly in her mind, Father departed with his children, abandoning her, as the strange voice had long warned he would.

The Ones departed to summon the aid of the Killiks, this time to create a prison. It would become known as the Maw Cluster. After this, the Ones departed for a new pocket dimension in which to carry on, but they would only ever after know grief and regret. Abeloth would never see her family again, and the misery and despair, coupled with the memories of her mother's betrayal and loss, drove her to madness.

Part IV: The Verdict

Chapter 29: The Infinite Empire and the Twilight Wars

In the long years that followed, the galaxy was restored, though never to its former splendor, and a vigilant eye was kept over dark Illathurion, upon which deep spells were placed, making navigation into and out of it difficult.

The ages passed with many strange adventures, but like the arrival of frost upon newly planted fields, the storm of galactic war came to visit again. Circa thirty-five thousand years before the Battle of Yavin, only a remnant of the Firstborn had managed to hold onto their former glory. Most had diminished, becoming a shadow of their former selves. The rest of the multifarious races proliferated.

The Celestials had seen to it that through bloodline or random selection, some would be born with a greater number of midichlorians, a gift that would enable them to tap into the lifeforce of the universe through the lifeforce within, as guided by the Will of the Force, and thus the lost heritage of the Firstborn might in part be reclaimed.

Aware that the Tho Yor would soon awaken, the Kwa had for centuries engaged in traveling the stars through the still-standing Infinity Gates, teaching the benevolent ways of the Force to any who had the capacity to learn. This had initially been the task of the Father, but the imbalance of Son and Daughter prevented him from departing their new world. The gathered Force-users would need instruction, however, for as with all things involving power, it could be corrupted to evil ends, so it was that Father tasked the Kwa with this commission.

The massive pyramidal ships traveled the galaxy once more, bringing together force-sensitives from numerous races to Tython. Academies and centers of Force-learning later came to spread to Caamas, Ossus, and others, as intended. Others, such as the Caamasi, renowned for schooling the galactic citizens on ethics, joined the Kwa in teaching, while the Gree taught benevolent technologies that would elevate civilization.

But there were yet incalcitrant and aggressive cultures, some who had fallen into economic and social decline following the War of Temporal Planes, others who sank into tribalism, while still others who took a strictly insular policy, or who ended up ruled by belligerent kings and tyrannical queens. And always there were those who bred in dark Illathurion and grew into brutal nations.

The inhabitants of the Core had not lain idle, and the stars ever called to them. They invented "sleeper ships," slow-moving vessels that allowed them to reconnect to their brothers and sisters on planets across the Core. Proving impractical, as it took decades or more to travel across space, they were eventually abandoned as newer and better advancements were made.

It was at this time that the first shadow of the Twilight Wars would begin to spread, borne from evil chance and perverse curiosity.

The Shadow Beings had alighted on Urthha to torment the dreams of man. They had been close to departing when they remembered that an Infinity Gate had once been housed there in the far distant past. Searching out the deep underground tunnels, they located a Star Temple. Now, the Shadow Beings serve naught but the Father of Shadows and none knows the chaos of their dark minds. These foul entities went off, and it was a long time before they made known what they had learned.

Tharagorrogaraht came to hear of it from one who passed through her worlds and whispered it into her darkest dreams. She was wise enough to keep the knowledge secret until the stars were right, for the brood of dark Illathurion were not to be trusted. Finally, when her daughters had grown weary of their desolate expanse, and the pale, obsequious morsels were growing scarce (or more difficult to hunt), they cried out to her, longing to gorge themselves on new, savory meats from the Realm Outside, for they recalled they had been particularly delectable. Gorog the Night Spirit ruminated darkly, concluding that with the Infinity Gate's potential destructive capabilities, they could hold planets hostage while she established galactic dominion.

With Typhojem destroyed and Mnggal-Mnggal essentially imprisoned, her plot would only have to be kept concealed from her other living sibling, Ooradryl. There were few could oppose his gluttonous offspring when they roamed unchecked throughout Illathurion, bleeding worlds dry. Her Wizards still held the Shadowstone, which would help ensure her rule as undisputed Night Queen against these and other dark denizens who would emerge once they knew she'd departed this demesne, but she would

first have to establish dominion in the other realm. Like her, Ooradryl and his brood could still depart Illathurion whenever they wished. That they hadn't meant they also feared the prophecy uttered by Horliss-Horliss. They had seen Wutzek die, but who knew what was true with the Celestials, for they were mysterious, dangerous beings. She would have to test things out before she proceeded any further.

For this purpose, Tharagorogaraht sent the Vulagool to discover the location of the Killiks, while the nyctocrys and nevoota were tasked with stirring up their old allies to war, spreading the word that the true and rightful master of the galaxy was returning, and that or those who obeyed her, power and authority would be granted. She then waited to see if the prophecy of Horliss-Horliss would come to pass. When no shining being of light appeared to destroy her servants, she dismissed the prophecy as a hollow threat and moved forward with her plans.

In secret, she emerged from Otherspace to Urthha, which was by now a dead world. Tharagorogaraht was powerful in ways the others were not, and with the aid of her Wizards, she took the planet from its orbit in realspace and transferred it with her to a lonely region in Otherspace.

The Star Temple would have to be defended from her adversaries, but only her most trusted allies could serve as sentinels. As it currently stood, the planet could not support life, for foul and strange as the gluttonous hordes of the Old Ones were, most were still beings of flesh and blood. Healing planetary bodies was not among her talents, but she remembered that there had been some amongst the Firstborn who had this power. Though they were now diminished, there would likely yet be some who could achieve this.

Tharagorogaraht called telepathically from her noxious throne in Mezzallmech to her hidden Killik vassals in the Outside Realm, instructing them to subdue and bring to Otherspace the other nests of the Killiks, or, on failing that, to seek out another remnant of the Firstborn in their place who could meet her needs.

On the petrified mounds of the Castle Lands on Alderaan and Alsakan, the hidden and long-abiding Dark Nest heard the call. The lead Killik hives fiercely opposed the traitorous servants of Gorog, and in the end, prevailed, though at the cost of much of the natural resources on Alderaan and Alsakan.

The Killiks reasoned then that the only reason the Dark Nest would have revealed itself was because the Old Ones were planning to return. The Killiks had given the galaxy the tools necessary to defend itself. They themselves would never again be drawn into the vicious wars of the enemy, for they had lost great numbers to the Vulagool in the Empyrean Wars, and in turn had brought the Varlian Empire—and nearly all of the Vulagool—to extinction. After sending warnings to whomever would listen, they departed en masse, taking with them whatever resources they could. The preservation of the galaxy was their paramount concern, and they left their own worlds in a state of self-regeneration, flying off to the Unknown Regions where they ensured that none would ever release Mnggal-Mnggal from his prison world.

The Night Queen seethed in her septic web at the failure of her Killik slaves. Still, she had others. In the meantime, she learned that some amongst her former allies in the Outside Realm would no longer serve her. An example would have to be made of them to strike fear in the hearts of those who had left off service to the Old Ones. Primary amongst these were the traitorous humans of the Kashi Mer Dynasty. These had once been the most assiduous servants of Onrai, the pernicious Queen of the Stars, but no more. They refused to return to the dark worship of their ancestors. Now, they would serve in another way, demonstrating to the galaxy the consequence of disobedience.

The Kashi Mer were viciously attacked, but in a surprise turnabout, they defeated their invaders. This could not stand. An example had to be made of them. Several resonance bombs were secretly placed in orbit around the vicinity of their primary star that would go off when their world came close enough to their sun. As their star was blown to supernova, the Kashi Mer would be annihilated.

It would take longer than Tharagorogaraht had intended, and she would not survive to see the victory, but in five thousand years, Kashi would be no more. Yet even in this, she failed. Rather than inspire fear, the legacy of the Kashi-Mer became one of staunch courage in the face of despotism and darkness, so that numerous races were emboldened by their steadfast example and determined to have peace.

Tharagorogaraht knew that her personal servitors, the Wizards of the Night Spirit, would not fail her, and she made a path for them out of dark Illathurion. Led by her firstborn, Griagh, who was terrible to behold, a faction of their forces departed to find a race of the Firstborn who could heal a planet. They had little desire to leave their master's side and had rarely done so before, but they obeyed without question.

Using the Shadowstone, a window opened through a black hole in the Modell Sector known as the Endor Gate, transforming it back into a wormhole from Otherspace to the Outside Realm. The evil races of Illathurion were not unknown to the Indur, who were the original inhabitants of the Endor moon and self-appointed Watchers of the Skies. They discerned the incursion of the Wizards of the Night Spirit into the galaxy and sent out emissaries to the Firstborn to warn them.

As with the Dark Nest before them, the Wizards of the Night Spirit were commanded to discover and capture a Firstborn race with the power to heal a planet. While the rest of the Wizards went off into the galaxy, Griagh and the Vassal Queen of the Wizards of the Night Spirit, who wielded the Shadowstone, infiltrated the Indur civilization.

But the Indur had already been prepared, and now their plan was in motion...

[\[This section accessed and read earlier\]](#)

Chapter 30: Farewell to the Gods of Dark Illathurion

The return of the old enemy was grievous news to the Firstborn, for the horrors of the previous cosmic battles were still remembered, and many were determined to flee rather than be induced to engage once more in the carnage and cruel vagaries of war.

The Twilight Wars were the last of the Cosmic Wars, fought between those who allied with the emissaries of dark Illathurion and those who prepared to defend the galaxy in the face of the old enemy. Bloodthirsty and warmongering armies had been amassed by the T'Surr, the Anzati, the Sith, the Vagaari, the Stenax, the Rakata, the Esh-kha, and numerous others who believed they'd be rewarded with power and valuable spoils from the ruling entities of dark Illathurion and spared in the coming holocaust when the remnant of the Old Ones returned to claim the galactic throne.

Feeding off the dark energies of suffering and strife, the fell worms of El'Shuddem rose up to devour the living and dying on both sides. Weapons ancient and new were brought to bear, but the dark powers found a surprise when the powerful engines of defense created by the Ones and the Killiks were brought to bear against them.

The Twilight Wars differed from the earlier conflicts in other ways too. They were not limited to opposing sides. Cruel races fought one another for supremacy. Where one was vanquished, another grew.

The Kwa had some years earlier arrived on Lehon to impart education and instruction. The Rakata rulers, though untrained in the dark side, were masters of deceit and dissimulation. Only those adept at concealing their emotions were allowed to speak with the Kwa, and the darker aspects of their civilization were carefully concealed from them. This deception lasted long enough for the Rakata to learn new technology, and more importantly, ways to harness the Force that they could twist to their own purposes. But when the Rakata inquired as to the destructive use of the old Infinity Gates, the Kwa grew suspicious, and after a perilous investigation, came to discover the truth behind the facade; theirs was a culture of domination, cruelty, and barbarism. The Kwa barely escaped with their lives, but it was in time to warn their people to begin the destruction of the Infinity Gates.

The Star Temples on enemy worlds were yet guarded by the offspring of ancient sentinels. To overcome these, the Kwa employed the help of the giant Zillo Beasts, Whuffa Worms, and others such as rancors and giant greelors who were taught to fight to overcome the vicious creatures that guarded the gates. The quick actions of the Kwa in destroying the Star Temples prior to the start of the Twilight Wars saved the lives of countless beings.

Furious, the Rakata put their newfound knowledge to work and began harnessing the dark side of the Force to their technological and biological achievements. Of the latter, they bred in the secret reaches of the Strathos Distribution, the Lugubraa, called the "Faceless Mouths," and set them loose on their enemies. Of the former, they re-developed hyperdrive technology and were soon installing it upon warships which they used to travel to various planets, spreading their Infinite Empire.

Despite their domination, the Rakata overlords ended up serving some good, creating allies out of former enemies, vanquishing the far more dangerous Esh-kha, imprisoning on Belsavis the ancient World Razer, and spreading hyperdrive technology. Rakatan galactic rule was also severely limited by the ancient defense devices of the Celestials and the Firstborn, which were put to use protecting entire regions of space against them and the hordes of the old enemy.

The Rakata also feigned allegiance to the Old Ones, and in secret, they conscripted their citizens and slaves in the construction of the Star Forge, a terrible device built on the specifications given to them by the Architects in the dim recesses of the past. With this, they would protect their interests against enemy or friend, for it was their own rule they were interested in, not that of any other, and to this end they called themselves the Builders.

As with all the weapons of the Architects, the Star Forge proved a thing of great evil. A vast orbital shipyard that created machines of war, it drew energy not only from the local sun but the midichlorians of the Rakata, an idea first put to use by the Varlian Empire. The Star Forge proved deeply corrupting to them, and not long after its completion, the Rakata were overtaken by psychosis as its vile engines drained hungrily from them. In the chaos that ensued, their slaves succeeded in revolting. A mysterious plague soon after followed, ending the Infinite Empire and Rakatan civilization for good.

The warnings of the Killiks, Indur, and others set in motion a chain of events. While some races maintained a policy of isolation and defense, others sought to meet their enemy head-on, putting the ancient weapons created for this purpose to good use. Still others fled the stars, leaving behind precious homeworlds to guardians, constructs, and defenders who would attempt to protect their world from the ravages of the enemy.

The Arbrans had been a truculent people in the dim past. Long-held guilt led them to believe their own dark natures would be an impediment to regaining the approval of the ancient Celestial guides whom they now sought to find. The Thaumaturgist Circle, made up of the spiritual and political leaders of Arbra, devised a mystical means to extricate the negative traits from the minds and hearts of the nation, believing that this would restore them to their original state and legacy as one of the Firstborn.

Their necromantic experiments appeared at first to work, though it resulted in the procreation of an incorporeal entity borne of their darker emotions. This spectral being, called the Darker, resembled them in form, but its mind was consumed in vastly evil thoughts. The ghastly wraith had been expected, however, and was trapped inside an energy field the Arbrans had erected around the borders of their ancient underground city. The field and their entire civilization were powered by the geothermal properties of hundreds of giant, naturally grown crystals.

Agas earlier, the Arbrans had had success in bioengineering the Kushiban race. Now, to further ensure the Darker did not escape, they augmented the branch of Kushibs still living on Arbra into a race of telepathic, energy-eating leporidae called the Hujiban, now known as Hoojibs, to be the guardians of Arbra. Satisfied that all would be well, the Arbrans then departed their vast underground cities and took to the stars.

Once in space, however, they discovered to their dismay that they could not so easily return to their original state of innocence, for the traits they sought to purge erupted in them again, and later in their offspring. They halted their journey several times to attempt various occult avenues of extricating the inner darkness that continued to plague them, and from these later experiments came other entities, such as the Starweird and those like it, until finally, the Arbrans exited the galaxy, never to be seen again.

The Arbrans were not the only ones haunted by their past. The Alashanians had long before come to rue their ancestors' choices, and they now refused to again be enticed into destructive acts. In the centuries that had passed, they had rebuilt a colossal and beautiful city on Alashan and welcomed their estranged cousins amongst the Firstborn. Now that the Old Ones were returning, they chose not be induced to violence again, but neither would they remain behind to be slaughtered. Masters of technological wonders, the Alashanians chose to live beyond the reach of all others. Down to the most intricate detail, the City of Forever was recreated within their powerful computers, after which the life force of each Alashanian was meticulously scanned and transferred, enabling them to essentially continue their lives as before in a digital facsimile of their world.

In order to ensure the survival of the computers, wherein they would dwell, they left behind a powerful bio-engineered Guardian, a fearsome and deadly sentinel to rival the creatures of dark Illathurion. The Guardian could teleport, alter his size, and tap into the geothermal power of Alashan to release massive destructive blasts as potent as that of the Death Stars. Not only would the city itself be protected from above and without by extensive mountain ranges, but the very airspace around Alashan would be impenetrable. And in the event that any did manage to get past the Guardian, the Control Rooms were also designed as an overlapping matrix that ranged the length and breadth of the city, ensuring that if even multiple stations failed, it wouldn't affect the overall systems, which would be repaired by lesser guardians designed for that purpose. So long as the planet was not destroyed, the Alashanians would live out their days in peace. Their only regret was that they would never again see their cousins and offspring in the worlds outside...

* *

The Wizards of the Night Spirit sent by Gorog had come to Kar'a'katok. The Shimhold world was covered in labyrinthine pyramids, vertiginous ziggurats, and exotic, mysterious temples given in the dim recesses of time to the unholy worship of the dark gods. Any who opposed them risked becoming sacrifices to the sanguinary rites of the priesthood. Still, a minority of

opposers thrived in secret, swelling to a movement, until civil war broke out, overthrowing the wicked priesthood and restoring the temples to their original noble purposes. The Shimholt made reparations and renewed their culture over the millennia, bridging relations with neighboring worlds and cultures. Now, the emissaries of the old enemy had reemerged calling to their former allies to join them in battle again. Hathkhalid Sud, leader of the Shimholt, rejected them outright. His people would never return to serving the powers of dark Illathurion.

The rejoinder to this refusal was the capture of Sud's children and consort, Psamtiken Re. The foul Wizards of the Night Spirit whisked them away to dark Illathurion, laughing at Sud's anguish and making it clear that his family's return and the salvation of all Kar'a'katok was conditional on this: the Shimholt must capture and bring the Osserians to a specified location in dark Illathurion through the open portal at the Endor Gate. The Wizards had learned of the Osserian gift of restoring damaged worlds, a power they had used many times at the end of the War of Temporal Planes.

Though it grieved him, Hathkhalid Sud felt he had no choice but to betray the innocent to save the innocent. In the end, he completed the dark deed and departed Otherspace, leaving the Osserian race behind in the bowels of Urthha. Hathkhalid Sud returned home with the bodies of his wife and children. Only one child had been spared, and in this, it was said he'd been shown a great mercy.

At last, the fearful day came when Tharagorrogaraht arrived with her festering hordes to take over New Earth and restore the Infinity Gate's destructive power. Her spies had informed her that the planet was habitable again, though still torrential and potentially hazardous. Enough time had passed that the Osserians should have had the planet transformed into a paradise by now. Perhaps some cataclysm had befallen them. Or perhaps they had figured out her plot. If that was so, they would make for a pleasing appetizer for her children.

Tharagorrogaraht sent another force of the Wizards of the Night Spirit back to the Outside Realm to discover what became of her son and their queen who never returned from Endor. The Indur were surely no match for this mighty servitor, but perhaps something unexpected had occurred. If the queen had fallen victim to foul play, she'd personally torture each and every one responsible.

But the Ewoks and other avatars of the Indur were far more clever than they appeared. The Ewoks had tricked and sealed away Griagh, after which they turned their attention to the Queen of the Night Spirit, whom they ensorcelled and secreted away before she could be rescued. The various benevolent tribes on Endor rejoiced at this news, thinking that Horliss-Horliss (known to them as Hexprax) had indeed returned to vanquish the Night Spirit.

It was by unhappy chance that Nyeegath the Devourer then happened upon Tharagorrogaraht and her armies. His progenitor Ooradryl had long suspected that his sister was hatching webs within webs, and he was sent to discover the extent of her designs. Tharagorrogaraht feigned conciliation while deciding how best to handle the unpleasant intrusion, but Nyeegath proved cunning and astute, and soon unraveled his aunt's plot. It was far too soon for Ooradryl to discover her plans and she was still far from established her empire in the Outside Realm.

She knew the brood of Ooradryl could not be silenced, tempted, or swayed, and though she did not relish it, drastic measures had to be taken. Tharagorrogaraht shot forth hundreds of viscous ropelike webs to cover Nyeegath's gilded shields. The creature was taken by surprise and before he could escape, the Night Queen pulled with all her might, snapping off his ventral shields. With his front exposed, Gorog vented hundreds of paralyzing tendrils, venomous webs that enshrouded the precious organs of Nyeegath.

The Devourer was not without defenses. His maw opened wider than ever before and he began to suck. He came alarmingly close to devouring Tharagorrogaraht, and had it not been for the Wizards of the Night Spirit, who came to the aid of their beloved mistress, biting and rending and tearing at Nyeegath's inner organs piece by piece, she would have expired then and there.

With a furious wrenching, Gorog ripped apart her adversary's entrails and snapped off the ebullient organ that served as his brain, leaving Nyeegath splashed open in contorting jerks. Tharagorrogaraht commanded her attendants and offspring to eat away at all that remained, and they hungrily and happily obeyed, so that not a single trace of Nyeegath was left.

But it was too late! Ooradryl had seen through his offspring's eyes and witnessed his sister's betrayal! In terrible haste, for she

could sense Ooradryl and his death-train arriving, Tharagorrogaraht and her army alighted unto Urthha.

It was then that she learned the ancient prophecy had been fulfilled. Wutzek had returned from death!

Wearied from her battle with Nyeegath, Gorog saw the amassing globes of the avenging spirit of terrifying power. Wutzek descended upon her and she again unleashed her cinnabar death-webs. Her offspring and servants, led by the King of the Night Spirit, rushed to destroy Wutzek as well, but he rained down a storm of pulsing fire-light that charred Tharagorrogaraht and her encroaching armies. Those among the Wizards of the Night Spirit who escaped were driven mad by the impending death of their mother, and the Dark Nest went into hiding once more.¹¹

The Wizards of the Night Spirit who had been sent to the Endor moon to discover what had happened to Griagh and the Queen of the Night Spirit, at that very moment, saw a great eclipse block out the sun and they learned of the death of their brothers and mistress. Stricken by immeasurable grief and loathe to return to their cold, empty worlds, the Wizards raged at the inhabitants of the Endor moon, fighting to destroy every living thing in their path until the world was drowned in the blood of their enemies. But the Ewoks were aided by the Light Spirit, as well as the Season Deities and all the forces the Indur had bioengineered for this very purpose, and the various warrior tribes who'd remained loyal to them rose up to repel the invading sorcerers and those they had seduced to their side.

Having earlier stolen the Shadowstone from the Queen of the Night Spirit, and learned its secrets, the Indur transformed it into the Sunstar-Shadowstone, which they now brought forth into the Battle of the Stone Circle within the evil Forest of Thorns. With the arcane knowledge of the Indur, an Ewok tribesman spun the Sunstar and uttered the spell of repulsion, sending the Wizards of the Night Spirit hurtling back through the rift in the Endor Gate into their ruined worlds on dark Illathurion, and sealing the gate behind them. Thus was the galaxy saved, not only from the depredations of the evil Wizards, but from all the inhabitants of dark Illathurion who would have soon come through.

Only the Queen of the Night Spirit remained imprisoned in a spell of sleep and ice on Endor, her powers and memories robbed her by the very Ewok shaman that now commanded the Sunstar. The Wizards had thought her destroyed, and in the thousands of years to follow, her origins were forgotten. She could not die, and she could not escape, until one day a mishap awoke her out of her frozen prism where she arose to discover herself old and weak, her appearance utterly altered by the spell into that of an Endorian mandrill.

Deep down she knew she had once been a being of great powers, some of which she could still tap into, but as of now she recalled only her ancient name, and she let it be known among the inhabitants unlucky enough to traverse her regions that she was Morag, whom they called the Tulgah Witch. None knew who she had been, not even her weak and groveling underlings amongst the Dulok and Yuzzum tribes. She struggled to regain her memories and recalled only that she came from beyond and that a great wrong had been done her by the Ewoks. Thus, she swore revenge upon the race that had caused her decline, and ever after sought the Sunstar-Shadowstone, feeling a connection to it, and believing it to have once belonged to her, for indeed it had.

In time, her powers returned, augmented by her studies in dark magic, until one day, she regained the long sought after Sunstar-Shadowstone, which restored her memory of who she really was. She then summoned her people beyond the stars in the empty lands of dark Illathurion, and they heard her call. But by the time they returned, Morag was no more.

* *

The number of valiant deeds, adventures, and tragedies of this age cannot be recorded here. The Twilight Wars were brought to a decisive end, and once again the universe became a vastly different realm than before.

The Core Worlds were free again to explore beyond the Inner Rim, and a new generation of travelers would start to visit distant worlds as they each developed hyperdrive engines of their own, humans from Corellia and the Core, Duros, Baragwin,

¹¹ In the years to come, the Dark Nest would split, with a new nest known as Thuruht emerging, penitent of their former deeds and vowing to serve instead Wutzek.

Verpine, Devaronians, Zabrak, and others began to span the void between stars. When the Republic was formed in the Core to unite all the worlds of the galaxy under a banner of peace it was as if another Golden Age had been born.

As the Celestials had planned, new guardians and guides had arisen, the Jedi Knights and other benevolent Force users, harbingers of light to stave off the new architects of malice, the Sith and others whose contumacious designs would continually grow in the epochs to follow.

Later generations would forget the promises and warnings of the Celestials, conflating them with the false Architects, deifying them into gods, or dismissing them as fabrications, while the encroachment of old age, death, and degradation came to be viewed as natural aspects of life, yet these too had been consequences, unseen and far-ranging, of the galaxy's earlier turn to violence.

Though the horrors of the distant past would be forgotten or transferred to legends and myths, on gloom-shrouded days, or in the small, whisper-haunted hours of the night, ever the long shadow of their wings could be felt. Slower to forget were the Firstborn for whom the uncounted ages of splendor would arise in the unquiet stirrings of their hearts.

Wutzek ever kept a close watch on the doleful worlds of dark Illathurion, returning there regularly to keep the remnant of the ancient enemy in check, though most could not escape even if they'd wanted, for few besides the Old Ones could open a portal into our realm.

Wutzek's vigilance did not go unobserved, for even an immortal as powerful as he could be taken by surprise as he was one day when he was captured by an evil cult dedicated to worship of the Soulworm. They now wielded the diaphanous gem that had been turned into an angle-trap, and they used it ensnare Wutzek, whom they brought aboard the Nil-Apharas, that strange and vast vessel that had once been the death-ship of dread Typhojem.

Granted unnatural long life and powers by a Silan sorcerer in exchange for the tortured victims of sacrifice, the Cult of the Five kept Wutzek imprisoned. Though they could not harm him, it would be centuries before he would escape to unleash vengeance upon them and roam the stars again. So did Tilotny's curse come to pass.

Chapter 31: The Testimony of Leia Organa Solo

"I think we've come to the point where we may stop," Reina Solov announced to the audience. "It does no favor to Hextrophon to read any further into the epilogue, which Q9 purports was composed after his death. It won't come as a surprise to any of you when I say that I remain skeptical of the veracity of this creation-myth. I am convinced the man had a healthy imagination but was suffering psychological problems, likely delusions, the evidence of which is in the extravagant nature of the epilogue. While I'll abide by the Council's decision, I'm not sure what you hope to accomplish by publishing this, save to destroy a man's reputation and cast aspersions on his important prior work. And yes, I am thinking of the Council, as well as what Hextrophon would have really wanted."

Q9 made a rude noise but otherwise stayed silent.

"I must admit," started Heilan Rotham, a respected senior professor of Lorr Universit, "that despite my skepticism and irrespective of whatever veracity, if any, exists in Hextrophon's findings, I feel for the man. It is neither a happy or healthy fate to have trod the road of shadow."

"We *could* edit out the fantastical portions," allowed Janzikek. "If we could trim certain elements, I would agree to release it with the Council's authorization, and even write a foreword indicating that Hextrophon was expanding on the work of Dr. Bowen..."

"In other words, you'd castrate it *and* cut out its heart!" sneered Baobab.

"It seems like a good compromise," one of the Obroan scholars sounded.

"*It is no such thing!*" Savyest retorted loudly. "And how exactly would we do that, I might ask? The very core of Hextrophon's fable eschews everything that has been cosmologically demonstrated and biologically accepted as to the origin of species in this universe, not to mention the dates we've come to rely upon, which he tosses aside like so much chaff. Or does this body now think that black holes were caused by the escape or destruction of ancient monsters from Otherspace, as he postulates? Frankly, Jazikek, I'm surprised at your sudden magnanimity! And no, Hoole, I'm not trying to protect dogma, but years of evidence and equations that have stood up to rigorous scrutiny. On these grounds alone I don't see why we don't all do Hextrophon a favor and delete this madness altogether."

There were several angry grunts, dismissive noises, and a few assents, and even Solov rolled her eyes at his bit of hyperbole. Historians were not wont to speak in terms of "deleting books," no matter how controversial.

"In my long years as both a Jedi and a scientist," Tionne Solusar said, standing up for the first time, "I have come to see that when we limit ourselves to what is currently thought to be known we throw away the possibility of future discovery and change. Many of us would not be here if the established conventions of yesteryear—evidence and equations that learned beings such as yourselves once accepted as ironclad truths—had not been challenged and overturned. Hextrophon's findings are merely this day's challenge."

"I agree with the Jedi Master on this," Godalhi concurred. "Our job is to present discoveries, hypotheses, and interpretations as we uncover them, not to obdurately protect established systems of thought, or, out of misguided loyalty, purge ideas that might disrupt them. Nearly all of our established facts are still based on interpretation, be it by organics or droids—neither of which are perfect by any means. So, let's be clear that there'll be no destroying anything in this Society, neither Hextrophon's manuscript nor anyone else's!"

"So you suggest we all waste what precious little time we have analyzing and debunking every delusional crackpot who submits some half-baked idea!" Janzikek complained.

"Hextrophon is no crackpot," Na'al protested, "and the presence of fantastical elements doesn't suddenly make him delusional."

"I'm afraid that's exactly what it does," Solov said flatly.

"Well, I, for one have always supported its publication," Graf-Well added apoplectically, "and yet my findings that Hextrophon did not write most of the manuscript have not even warranted the respect they deserve!"

"Thank you, Graf-Well," Na'al interrupted. "I'm sure we all look forward to your interpretations when your book is released, but as we heard much of your hypotheses at great length on the first day of this seminar, we must move on. I think it's time to put the matter to vote."

"I realize I'm not a member of the Council," Leia Solo gently interrupted, "but may I say a few words beforehand?" Savyvest sighed loudly, but she was acknowledged. "Yes, there are mythic, even fantastic elements in Hextrophon's treatise. They form the foundation of his work and can't simply be edited out. Like it or not, Hextrophon's pre-Republic history contains aspects that some will find difficult to accept. Even I have difficulty accepting some of it!"

The room stirred. Dr. Nuar and Baobab reacted as if they'd been struck; even Janzikek seemed taken aback. Only Hoole maintained a slight smile.

"But who of us would have believed a day before the events at Belkadan that Ithor, Kalarba, and Sernpidal would be no more? That Coruscant would be transformed into an overgrown jungle? The Vong showed us that monsters exist, but we should have already known that. Palpatine and far too many others showed us that. Yet if the forces of darkness are real, then perhaps those of the light are as well. At least some of Hextrophon's revision of ancient history appears to be substantiated by the Watcher, and Mistress Mnemos has sent in a report stating that she supports his conclusions, as does Q9..."

"Three damaged cognitive modules," Janzikek taunted.

"There are some who say that history is written by the victors," Leia continued. "Yet I've seen that that is not always true. This Council, in whatever name and form it's taken over the years since I was a young girl, has ensured that even in the face of persecution, all sides of the story are presented and preserved. You are not relics or fossils. When you publish a variety of ideas, theories, and concepts in the face of those who would wipe out all but their own, you prove you are a needed organism that preserves different avenues of understanding the truth in the face of those who would promulgate falsehood.

"Arhul Hextrophon was a vital part of that organism, a man of deep integrity and a staunch defender of truth. If this work is the product of some psychological difficulty he was having prior to his death, well, so be it. Hextrophon has earned the right to have his work stand or fall on its own merits. Yes, some will scoff. That will always be the case, or do you think that everything which bears the Council's stamp has been readily accepted by every reader?

"If you still fear such derision will reflect poorly on you or on this august body, send your critics to me. I have already prepared a statement for our resident journalist and an introduction to the journal stating that I have personally borne witness to some of the fantastic things Hextrophon wrote of. I'm here today because I've come face to face with the entity known as Wutzek; I've personally interacted with this Tilotny and the others—what you call the Bedlam Spirits—with my own eyes and heard them speak! *Fantastic*, you say?! Yes, absolutely, but nevertheless true. So if anyone wishes to mock or scorn the Council, they can first speak to me!" Leia had to wait for the room to quiet down again before continuing. "But there are many who will not be so quick to dismiss the seemingly impossible. Mon Mothma, for one, openly spoke of the Force, and her belief in the Supreme Maker was public at a time when such ideas were punishable by imprisonment or death."

"Your exploits," Gulek rebutted, "and the oddities you encountered only corroborate names and the existence of unknown entities, such as the Bedlam Spirits; you know this doesn't furnish proof. Hextrophon, in his state-of-mind, could have appropriated your encounters to fashion a creation myth."

"I don't deny the possibility," Leia responded. "Nevertheless, I've heard many theories over the years. Hextrophon's is the only one that makes any sense in regards to my experiences. As far as proof, I could no more prove I'd seen Tilotny than that I'd dropped a water balloon on Tarkin's head or been his wife's handmaiden for a day, yet all of that is true. The creature that came out of Hanapen's body doesn't furnish proof, but it does provide a striking piece of evidence..."

"As does my testimony and the information given me by the Watcher," reminded Q9.

Leia smiled. "If Hextrophon's journal proves to be little more than myth, do we not still cherish our myths for giving us tales of courage and hope? In such strange and dark times as these, stories as this are ever needed. But if his document proves to be a record of *truth*, as I believe it to be, then you should be careful not to stand in the way of it, or in the future, you may be remembered as no different than agencies like COMPNOR, and you'll have failed in your commission as historians. Arhul's final

wish was to see his journal published, and to that end, he went through a great deal of trial and tribulation, as his faithful droid can attest. You should honor that sacrifice. In the end, it is up to each individual to choose for herself what to believe.”

With that, Leia sat back down and the Council members agreed to a short break before reconvening in an adjoining alcove to vote in private amongst themselves. Personal droids and flesh-and-blood retainers went about supplying refreshments for the Council and its various guests. Within one hour, the Council returned to the main conference room with the verdict, their faces silent and still as the monuments of Kooroo.

Chapter 32: A Droid and His Maker

Without preamble, Voren Na'al read the verdict: "39 in favor, 42 against. Hextrophon's journal will not be published by the Council. It can, of course, be published privately..." The rest of his words were drowned out by the mixed uproar of angered shouts and congratulations. Na'al furrowed his brows, surprised at his own feeling of disappointment, and took his seat looking as grave as the broken Statue of the Scholar that stood outside the Council Hall. The Council had let his mentor and friend down and done a disservice to this august body. Perhaps he had too. Even though in the end he voted in favor of publication, he wondered if he should have spoken up sooner in favor of it. But the truth was he didn't know if the things Hextrophon wrote were real or not, or some mixture of the two. He just felt in his gut that the Council was wrong. Hextrophon's journal would be privately published, dismissed as the fringe work of an unstable man, read by very few, and soon forgotten. Somehow, he'd hoped it would turn out different.

The room had grown loud at this point as heated arguments mounted. Q9 grew tired of it all and let out another long shrill note, piercing through the cacophony.

"Really, Q9, you'll never win any friends tormenting them like that," Q9 said in Arhul Hextrophon's voice.

"That's the least of my concerns," Q9 retorted, in his own voice. "I'm not sure how you put up with them over the years!"

"Q9!" Ellis roared. "That is *hardly* appropriate at this time!"

"Best to let it go," Janzikek stated, almost gently.

"It's entirely appropriate," Hextrophon's voice said through Q9. "Because I'm not actually dead... as Cue-nyne told you, though, perhaps I am *different*."

The room grew awkwardly silent. Had the droid's mechanical brain actually disintegrated? He had been under extreme duress. Before anyone could take measures to remove him from the room, Q9's "Hextrophon" voice spoke again: "I have to say, I was curious to see how you'd vote."

"I won't say 'I told you so' but I did tell you so!" Q9 retorted sarcastically in his own voice. "We could have skipped all the debates."

"Perhaps, but it was nice to hear my friends defend me, sort of like being at my own funeral," Hextrophon's voice said. "And besides, debate is healthy."

"You always were morbid," Q9 said before the room turned blacker than night. A rubicund, pyramidal blur, too fast to focus the eye on, crossed the room.

And then the stars came out!

* *

"You'll notice," Hextrophon said, now a disembodied voice floating above everyone's heads, "that the constellations here are quite different than anything you've seen. That's because you've been brought to a different cosmic sphere. Quite lovely, isn't it?"

The room could no longer be seen, no walls, floors, ceiling or podium, only the bright stars and beings fearfully clinging to their seats—and some to each other. (Despite everything going on, Na'al was surprised to find himself amazed at who some of these secret liaisons were). Stark terror marked the faces of most. Janzikek croaked about Q9's "nasty tricks," but he was clearly frightened. All of them were, though Hoole was quietly chuckling to himself.

"Is this some kind of game?" warned Ellis, a tentacle waving in threat.

"It must be," stated Rotham with some small irritation. "The magician Xaverri was known to have pulled off stunts like this." Her statement was repeated throughout the audience, many of whom rose up in defiance of the "parlor tricks" being played on them.

The room had become notably colder by this time, though not dangerously so. The constellations of galactic clusters whizzed

by at terrific speeds. It was exhilarating, beautiful, and utterly terrifying. Those who believed it to be a trick gathered their courage and indignation and demanded in loud voices to know what was going on. Solov, determined to expose the chicanery and put an end to this farce, ordered her personal assistant-droid to uncover the ruse.

Her XC2 droid cleared his throat loud enough to silence everyone before addressing the room: "To my knowledge, Q9 is not engaged in any deceit. In fact, he does not appear to be amongst us at all at the moment. Nor can I determine a cause to account for this phenomenon. My sensors tell me that we have departed Coruscant to unknown outer spheres." Tionne and several other droids in the room vocalized similar conclusions. "I cannot explain logically how this is possible. Perhaps we are all suffering from a mass hallucination, though that seems highly implausible."

Gasps filled the room, either from XC2's revelation or the glowing, anti-parallel helix that now rushed towards them. The helix undulated like twin Bouncers within the plexus of a pulsing firmament, but that was lost on this body as the horror and precipitancy of their course dawned on them. Finally, their velocity slowed and they passed by one of the two helix-heads. And then it spoke.

* *

"As it turns out, I didn't really die that day," the undulating Bouncer-helix said in Hextrophon's voice. "Think about the third Gate, the Apotheosis Gate. Have you yet figured out what that is?"

The Council and its guests were mostly silent and terrified, convinced they'd fallen into the phantasmic realm of nightmare. Na'al, Godalhi, and Hoole were the primary ones keeping up a discourse with the gargantuan agate head.

"I'm sorry to have to go to such extreme measures to persuade you, and no doubt some of you will convince yourself this was all a dream. But no matter, the manuscript must be published with the Council's seal of approval. Not for my sake, mind you, but for others who will need to understand and have hope, for we live in confusing times and dark days are yet ahead. And while I have your attention, let me say thank you to my supporters. No better friends could I ask for. That's all. I was never much one for speeches. Oh, my detractors... While I can respect that we have different worldviews, you'd do better to consider other possibilities and be more critical of the preconceived notions, methods, and body of knowledge you've accepted as true. I was surprised to find how much of it was ideology and not as fact-based as I'd thought. Ah well, I hope that wasn't too much of a platitude. And don't forget the Third Gate. It's the most important... Oh, and Graf-Well, *I wrote the entire document... though I did have help at the end!*"

A kaleidoscopic band of translucent lights in varying hues of chrysolite, almandine, melanite, rubescent, topaz, and chrysoprase penetrated the room, emanating from the Bouncer's open "mouth" as they drew closer to it.

And then it swallowed them.

Epilogue: Transformation

Of Arhul Hextrophon

When I, at last, awoke from the sunless spheres of oblivion, the strange tall man stood before me. He was arrayed in the archaic garb of the Core worlds, which lent him a regal air, but his eyes disturbed me, for they were chatoyant and deep as fathomless gulfs, and I could not gaze long upon them for fear of losing what little grip on sanity I still had left. In a resounding voice, he addressed me, saying: "I am Wutzek, sovereign servitor of the Eternal and progenitor of the galactic darkness. Rejoice, for you of all the beasts of the boundless provinces have been chosen."

I clearly lost the connection between my misfiring brain and tongue because I sputtered some indecipherable response. The nervous suspension of the last few days and terror of the final few moments likely commingled into a state of befuddlement. "I don't understand. I thought... I thought they killed me. What did you say you were?"

He ignored the addled questions and stretched out his arm to me again as I'd seen him do when the Shadow Beings had been ready to engulf me, and in his hand appeared what looked like a segmented holocron. At that, I grew nervous, for though it was conical, it was like a ziggurat in shape and rubescent, and I feared what it denoted.

The holocron then spoke in a strange language I'd never heard, though I found I could understand it. It was an inhuman, but male voice, so I will refer to it as such—and it said not to fear. At that, the holocron grew—or perhaps I shrunk, I cannot say—to become a trapezoidal portal which my guide stepped through and I hesitantly followed. On the other side was the vast firmament I'd known all my long years. The rutilant ziggurat that was now a door summoned forth a stream and said in his strange tongue that he was to be the vessel we were to sail upon. And he told us his ancient name, which was Splendid Ap, and at last, I understood that he was the avatar of Time, but not for the first time I wondered aloud how I had come to be designated to take such a fantastic journey. Wutzek only said such things were the Will of the Force.

So thinking it all a dream, for I had dreamt of magnificent voyages in my youth, I stepped onto the ship that was Splendid Ap, and the galaxy passed before my eyes in its splendor. We moved from the Core to the Colonies and the Inner Rim, then outwards to the Expansion Region and Mid Rim, scanning all the wondrous jeweled worlds we crossed. I scowled past the Corporate Sector before fleeing to the Tingel Arm and the circumambient Outer Rim where I puzzled at the Rishi Maze, then through all the colors of the Flamewind after which we soared past the wilds of Wild Space and into the disquieting Unknown Regions. There we floated out beyond the void in between the stars of the neighboring dwarf galaxies, which had once been the home of the Celestials of this realm, but which war had irrevocably marred.

So we rode the stream to the deeper void, silent, immensely dark and imposing, to a place where nothing alive or dead had ever passed. There, I saw Wutzek's true form, as he had first shaped it, an aggregation of interlinked, glowing orbs that shifted and swayed like a lucent Will-o'-the-Wisp. "This is an unknown path to the fields of tomorrow," the cobalt orbs who formed Wutzek intoned, "that unknown realm which few have found—the home of the Celestials."

To my horror, I was brought back to that umber, indeseccrate dimension wherein the cold, nethermost husks that were long-dead worlds floated like tombs in an interplanetary boneyard in space, and the luminaries had shrunk into silent, sorrowful cressets. Under the charcoal and crimson sky of pinprick black eyes and corposant suns, sailed the stream of time that was Splendid Ap, where I was told a great and terrible secret I cannot yet share, save that it was a word of renewal that recalled the fragrance of Lake Sah'ot during the vernal season and which had only been uttered in the dead places when they had teemed with life so long ago. My eyes widened when I thought I espied a blade of green open upon the hard, cold mass of rock, but the eidolon that was Wutzek only laughed in his echoing way that lit up his ever-shifting globules and said it was but a vision of the reconstruction, long in the future. But I wondered if that meant now...

And we came to the great spiral causeway and sailed down into a long, dark hollow that was redolent of an ancient burrow I'd crawled through when I was but a boy, but far deeper and darker. This was the shaft of that great black hole that is Old Danda Sine, called now for one who is no more, and the stream passed into its hoary mouth where ancient Wutzek kept silent. The

tunnel descended in a winding slope for what would have been ages in sunlit worlds. There had never been a sun here, and only the radiance of Wutzek's unearthly, cold-white orbs inexorably sailing on in the Stygian gloom gave me hope for an eventual release from the lightless, twisting passage that wound ever on.

At last, we arrived into a wide and solemn canyon set aside for those for whom time has ceased. Glaucoous and grey radiance illuminated, but dimly, the interior of the immense, melancholy chasm. Lined in rows, one upon the other with but a meter of space in between, and one next to the other with but a meter of space in between, for a million kilometers up and a million kilometers down, and a million kilometers to the right and a million kilometers to the left, lay the prone figures of innumerable forms. This was how they were stacked and arrayed, and only the stream ran through the midst of them, yet did not touch any of the forms. It recalled the sacrosanct Hall of Satabs on Ventooine, except that it contained every manner of sentient life, even that of animal and mechanical life, and I opened my mouth to speak of it in whisper, but stopped, for it seemed to me that even the barest hush would boom forth like thunder in a valley that had never known rain. Voices did not sound here, save for the running of the stream that echoed always like the softly-lilting canticle of far-off chimes.

I approached a form to touch it, but my hand passed through, and at that moment I saw before my eyes glimpses of the being's life from the cradle to the grave, and I was shocked to recognize him as one whom I'd loved. I fell into a deep gloom then, both for the one who'd died, as for the billions upon billions in the uncountable aeons in which they'd resided in this sepulchral grey-green chasm at the apex of a black hole. I wondered how many arrived with each passing moment. And nothing made a sound but the gurgling stream urging us on, for this was not our place, Splendid Ap intoned, and I wondered at that too. And later, when we passed beyond the sacrosanct hall of sorrows, Wutzek would say that I should rather grieve for those who had not yet arrived. So I asked, "If that was the place for those for whom time has ceased, how can it be that the stream of time runs through it?"

And the guardian who was my guide answered and said, "Because time ever moves forward, though for now they cannot touch it," and his words puzzled me.

"I tried to touch one, but my hand passed through and I saw before my eyes his life from beginning to end, and I knew him, but had not known he'd died."

"That which lives in memory alone can no longer be touched, but not a detail of life is ever lost or strays."

"Yet even droids? And beasts?!" I wondered aloud.

Wutzek laughed, but its cadence held a forbidding tinge. "In his vanity, man imagines he is superior to all others, but that is the great lie. There is no superiority of sapient life, not over the droid, nor over the beast; for you are all beasts. You all come from the same source and are all returning to the same source so that there is but one eventuality, for all come here and after that... who is to say, but that perhaps you may depart for other shores."

Then, at last, I understood that this must be the place where the spirits of the dead go after they sink into the Depths of Eternity at the bottom of the Lake of Apparitions.

We next came to a distorted rent in space, like a ruptured scar where the stream would not approach; neither would Wutzek venture, and it occurred to me that that tenebrific wormhole was once something else. I was told to peer through the window of the ethereous horizon, but for a moment, to glimpse into that ghastly empery of Chaos, the termination place of all that was evil and could not be redeemed.

At that, my spirit left me, for I was in great fear to look upon such a dread realm, and it was some time before I had ceased to shudder, but Wutzek stood on, and the ship that was Splendid Ap was silent, and even the stream ceased to make a sound. So, at last, I peered through the caliginous window of the event horizon, dreading even the most tenuous glance at the six impenetrable gates and its six demonic guardians, the fallen gods of Illathurion, but I saw nothing at all. And Wutzek nodded his head sagaciously and the ship and the stream of time carried us on.

Ap turned to a playful mood and said he would show us the great Pool of Living Dream past the one-way door where only those with the key have ever returned, the Spirits of Jedi on errands for the moribund universe of old or the nascent universe ahead.

Into the Netherworld of the Force, we disembarked through the vortex of fog that stood as its gate upon a haven of cool, soft lights that reflected in varying gradations and nebulous wisps. It had once been called Aznak before it was transferred; now it was a dominion of deep calm with but the twinge of sorrow to color its edges. Wutzek said we could observe, but for a moment.

Beyond a spatial divide into a furtive dell of yellow and sage luminance could be seen the Force users of old, the Jedi, as well as those of the many traditions who used the Force for healing, growth, and the preservation of life. In the phantasy of my delusion (as I still believed it to be), past the trellises of lambency, I thought I espied a wizened, olive-colored gnome who I'd once met in a swamp aeons ago. My eyes must have widened in surprise, for the gnome winked at me with a look of mirth, but Wutzek spoke then, and the old Jedi Master disappeared into the solemn crowd of students and colleagues. "These are to be the Sovereign Servitors presiding at dawn in the fields of tomorrow where the Celestial silhouettes now dance in joyful preparation of those to come under new stars..."

Moving on, we alighted upon a giant crevasse, behind which formed a wall of charged particles standing at the uttermost breath and depth and height, and descending incrementally to the movement of its own clock that no man can count. We crossed over a gap of multitudinous angles that looked like shards of glass, where a being of abstract and ever-changing form, heliotrope and bioluminescent, introduced itself as the Avatar of the Hourless, who would carry us through the portal, for time could not yet take us, though I saw that tributaries of the stream still abounded. The heliotrope nebula said that it had many names, but the one it was known as beforetime was Horliss-Horliss.

Horliss-Horliss carried us through the portal into a vast atlas of stars I'd never known, and the stream that was Splendid Ap moved around, before, and behind us, though we no longer sailed upon it. We passed by a yawning expanse of wildly flexural nebulae surrounding and penetrating a universe lit by a supernal luminary from above and populated by variegated, incandescent beings of diverse and changing form, cyclic and star polygons, annulus and arbelos, triquetra and lemniscates, and countless others, which flew hither and thither as lambently shining stars—for they had been newly lit, and would be ever lighted by the empyrean brightness of above.

Spherical sounds echoed in the spaces in-between, resplendent and venerable like the first songs at the start of time, but also like new compositions never before heard; wilder colors abounded and formed, and life—as it had never been—sung to its resonant and fathomless chords, deep in the firmament of the fields of tomorrow.

Enormous beyond comprehension was that field, greater than any that had ever been, and yet no corner of it was without illumination and beauty and sound; though with grace and not fury did the lights of the Celestials bound and caper, and the Force resonated strong and joyful to the ethereal winding rhythm of the dancing suns and all which they lit, and even the wandering stars left their orbits to dance beside them, and three that looked like planets, but with impossible faces; one that was of deep emerald and bright blue, which used its cobalt waters to form a mischievous smile as if to remind me. Around him, in artless abandon pirouetted the colossal eidolon of a beautiful woman with a flowing dress and long green hair... Spirals and swirls lit upon Horliss-Horliss, which Wutzek, also aglow, said was a symptom of laughter.

"Why does she dance?" I thought to ask.

Horliss-Horliss replied and said, "Because she and her lost children have come home."

"What is this place?"

"It is one of tomorrow's fields, where the Reconstruction is being prepared, the New Universe, where many will come to reside when the stream of time breaks forth like a torrent to carry them. But of the vile ones, the remorseless slayers, the recreant prevaricators, the paramours of greed, and defilers of innocence, these can never gain purchase, for the shadows are no more and will never rise again. And all that rides upon the stream will arrive in heir to wisdom, compassion, and strength, and thus forever will all violence cease, so that not even the black memory of it will taint the fields."

Past the warming incandescence, we were carried upon Horliss-Horliss, as upon solar winds, to catch the undulations of the ever-running stream and the ship that was Splendid Ap who governs the doors and passageways to and fro and backwards and forwards, so that Horliss-Horliss bid us farewell. I asked if we would follow upon the stream and was told that the stream ran forever on, but it was time to move on from it, though I found that strange since the stream itself was time. But Splendid Ap, who

was nearby, read my mind and laughed in his strange language of numbers and dials, so we parted ways for a time, though I thought I saw another tributary appear.

At last, or at first, for time had ceased meaning for me now that Splendid Ap had gone, I asked how we were to sail on without current or stream. But then the star-lines rotated back and forth, and blinked once and swayed, and I appeared in a lovely, beach-wood paneled room with the sun streaming in through a large bay window that opened upon a garden of flowers and herbs. Ancient statuary dotted the arbour amidst trellised vines and moss-grown gambrel roofs. Carven marble rails appeared in the distance betwixt the tall, dreaming hills and fragrant sweeping orchards that ran down glades to fertile valleys of wildflower, butterfly, and bird. And I could hear the cries of the Silverwing and recalled at last that I stood in my former house overlooking Lake Sa'hot on Chandrila, back when I had been a living man—for it occurred to me that I was no longer. The thought didn't frighten me as it would have then, though a touch of sorrow did press upon me for an instant, for there were things I had not done that I would have wished to, but Wutzek said to take heart.

It was a wonder to gaze again upon the familiar fields I had known. Sweet smells wafted off the lolling waters that fed the pastures, bringing with them the reminiscences of olden times that I once sweetly pined for. While yet I loved these sights, sounds, and smells, I longed now for the fields of tomorrow and the Celestial bodies that danced in the luminal firmament to the new song that was also old before time, for it meant joyful abandon for all, and not just a few.

Wutzek appeared again as the tall and handsome man, but younger now, though still attired in the formal and archaic garb of the Core worlds, and said that I must record the things I'd seen, for I was to complete the journal. It occurred to me to ask what I had become, for it seemed I was a living man only hours before—but perhaps it was years (I could no longer tell). And Wutzek said that I had become his offspring, an adopted firstborn to replace another that was lost to the darkness long ago. I started to mention that there were two such that Wutzek had lost—though I surmised they were no longer—and realized then exactly who the other adopted offspring would be, which caused me to laugh, for the thought of that one roaming the stars was something few would believe.

* *

As Hextrophon's story ended, so did it begin.

The firmament that had before come alive with aureate bursts of joyous color had settled to an amaranthine serenity. And if one listened closely, they could just barely discern the haunting strains of some ebullient chord.

"Q9, if you're ready..." Hextrophon said.

"Are you kidding?" the droid's disembodied voice responded. "I've been waiting my whole life for this..."

Some in the crowd began again to scan for him, but others merely looked to the stars in longing, for they had not just heard Hextrophon's epilogue, but experienced it through his eyes. The astromech truly was no longer amongst them. Then in a moment, the second head of the double-helix drew back its head and shook it, and in a scolding voice that was Q9's, said to those watching, "And don't make me come back!" Then the lights pulsed and all turned to alabastrine.

The Council chamber had returned to itself. Wild-eyed and in shock, the audience stared at one another unable to speak for long minutes. Some simply smiled; others openly wept and embraced. Plenty thought it was an elaborate hoax perpetrated by Q9 and possibly Hoole or Na'al, but even they felt it was well done. It went down on record as the most exciting meeting any Historical Council had ever had.

Janzikek had to ask: "What is this Third Gate he spoke of? And where does one find it?"

"It inevitably finds us," said Hoole. "Death is the gate. And compassion is the key."

Hextrophon's book was published with nearly all of the Council supporting it. It was met with wilder and louder controversy

than most had expected, with opinions weighing in on all sides, but it was the Council's biggest selling academic work of all time, topping charts normally reserved for more mainstream titles. Ironically, it kept the Council alive, with the study of ancient and modern history becoming fashionable in the galaxy again. The administration, who had indeed considered cutting funding to the organization, was forced to reassess that idea in the face of the renown and significance afforded the Historical Council by a populace taking a renewed interest in all eras of the past.

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joe Bongiorno is the creator of the Star Wars Expanded Universe Timeline (www.starwartimeline.net), which publishes lost stories in the universe begun by George Lucas. He is the author of the eight-volume series *Black Sabbath: The Illustrated Lyrics*. Joe also runs a small-press publishing company called the Royal Publisher of Oz (www.theroyalpublisherofoz.com) and is the creator of the Royal Timeline of Oz (www.oztimeline.net) and the X-Files Chronology (www.xfilestimeline.net). Joe has co-edited the *Cyberpunk Nexus: Exploring the Blade Runner Universe*, and has written essays on science-fiction and fantasy for several Sequart Books anthologies, *Wizard of the Coast's* Star Wars Gamer magazine, short stories for *Oziana* magazine, and has contributed material to *West End Games*, *Star Wars Insider*, and *Dark Horse Comics*. Joe currently lives in an ever-expanding library on Long Island where he caters to the demands of five cats and two dogs.

SUPERNATURAL ENCOUNTERS

The Trial and Transformation of Arhul Hextrophon



Joe Bongiorno